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Iqbal's Family and Self-Searching: Navigating Tradition and Modernity in Zadie Smith's White Teeth

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Abstract

This paper explores Zadie Smith's White Teeth as an example of postcolonial evolution of identity in cosmopolitan London, particularly the emphasis on the daily lives of the Iqbal family. The research being examined delves into the ways Samad Iqbal, his wife Alsana Begum, and their twin children, Magid and Millat, are experiencing fractured and fragile identities due to migration, cultural relocation, and conflicts between generations. This novel, as investigated in this paper, challenges established concepts of faith, culture, and national belonging by presenting identity as a fluid and questionable process. Samad's stressed loyalty to heritage, the twins' contrasting attitudes to cultural marginalization, and Alsana's daily rebellion all underscore the difficulties experienced by immigrant families as they make efforts to find a compromise between ancient customs and modern life. The gap between first- and second-generation experiences indicates the flaws of cultural exclusivity and the obstacles of sustaining personal identity by way of exclusion or returning to ancestral roots. In conclusion, the study's findings suggest that White Teeth rethinks identity as a dynamic process shaped by the interplay of tradition, authority, and individual lived experiences within a contemporary, diverse community.

Keywords: *Self-searching, Navigating, Tradition, Modernity, Iqbal's family, Identity, and Hybridity*

Introduction

White Teeth novel (2000), written by Zadie Smith, contains an in- depth investigation into cross-generational tension, cultural diversity, and postcolonial identities in heterogeneous British society. The narrative, which takes place in the following war in London, addresses the daily activities of immigrant families from traditionally occupied places while they struggle through challenges related to religion, identity as individuals, and integration in a community that has been constructed through colonial legacy and diversity of culture. Using constant interactions between relatives as well as personal tensions, Smith critiques the claim that identity is stable or biological by representing the concept as changing, debated, and regularly influenced by the cultural and historical circumstances.

The research being conducted investigates how White Teeth reveals the cracks of identity throughout waves of South Asian immigrants in London. The Iqbal family is a combination of Samad Iqbal, his wife Alsana Begum, and their twin boys, Magid and Millat. The research looks into the way that cultural discrimination, faith-based anxiety, and alienation negatively impact one's personal subjectivity and interpersonal interactions by implementing postcolonial frameworks concerning identity and hybridity, notably Stuart Hall's (1990) notion of identity as a process and Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) viewpoints of conflict and imitation. Along with one another, Magid and Millat's widely unique responses to societal marginalization, Samad's adherence to heritage and ethical standards, and Alsana's overlapping tactics for defiance indicate interpersonal challenges and multifaceted psychological aspects of immigrant experience.

Cultural rigidity has been challenged by White Teeth, as this study implies. Samad's endeavour to sustain an unchanging sense of self through the act of his son's compelled leaving which eventually fails, and the twins' contrasting paths one towards rationality in the secular world and the other one towards religious rigidity that indicate the unpredictable nature of constructing a personality within a multicultural society by illuminating the unstable nature of concepts like ethnic purity, spiritual authenticity, and the false promise of coming back. Alsana's handling of hybridity highlights even more how lived experience and subtle resistance, as opposed to ideological certainty, form identity.

Finally, White Teeth describes identity as a dynamic negotiation affected by history, power, and migration. Smith reconsiders the idea of British identity through the Iqbal family as multifaceted, unstable, and tightly connected with the impacts of colonialism and cultural displacement.

Methodology

Research Design

With the objective to explore representations of postcolonial evolution of identity in Zadie Smith's White Teeth (2000), this study adopts a qualitative research design centred around textual and topical literary analysis. Qualitative textual analysis seems recommended for the purpose of this research since it involves an extensive evaluation of concepts, how personalities develop, and subject structures within an author's work, compared to quantitative evaluation or numerical categorisation.

Theoretical Framework

Through a strong focus on Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) ideas of hybridity, conflict, imitative behaviour, and the "third space," as well as Stuart Hall's (1990) perception of identity as dynamic, fluid, interpersonal, and continually in a changeable state, the paper's inquiry is centred on postcolonial theory. The theoretical framework needed to comprehend matters regarding immigration, cultural relocation across-generation tension, and the struggle for identity can be obtained from these fundamental perspectives.

Primary and secondary sources

The primary source of study was Zadie Smith's White Teeth (2000). The book has been recognized as an influential literary and cultural material that exposes ethnically diverse contemporary conditions of Britain. Secondary sources encompass academic journals, authoritative journal papers, and scholarly articles concerning diasporic literature, postcolonial literature, and critical studies of White Teeth. These materials add context for the analysis and additionally reinforce the interpretations.

Method of Analysis

Thematic analysis has been employed in the current research paper, focusing on common concepts and story patterns that relate to religious anxiety, intercultural hybridity, fractured identity, and the idea of coming back or return. For the purpose of investigating how self-identity gets established and addressed within the text, close reading approaches have been adapted to targeted interactions, character stories, and sections of text. In an attempt to prove that post-colonial identity can be seen as flexible and debated instead of being permanent or mandatory, the study puts an emphasis on the development of characters, plot, and figurative variances.

Sample of the Study

Precisely gathered figures and scenes from the narrative of White Teeth (2000) constitute the study's sample, with an especially strong focus on the Iqbal family. Samad Iqbal, Alsana Begum, and their twin boys, Magid and Millat, are the focus of the research.

Due to the fact that they exemplify a variety of generational and personal attitudes towards relocation, cultural dispersion, and the construction of identities in the contemporary United Kingdom, such participants have been selected through intentional sampling. First-generation immigrants' anxieties regarding safeguarding their faith and cultural originality can be observed by Samad Iqbal; everyday opposition and mixed identity are evident in Alsana Begum; and varied attitudes to cultural loneliness and integration are revealed by Magid and Millat.

This research paper puts an emphasis on specific occurrences and the growth of figures that indicate identity debate, hybrid nature, and tension among generations. The study conducted pays attention to certain scenes that touch on challenges associated with contemporary postcolonial identity, instead of giving a comprehensive examination of the entire piece of writing. The proposed sample approach matches the main goals of this research, allowing for qualitative insight.

Samad's anxious adherence to tradition

Smith illustrates intergenerational challenges within South Asian immigrant families through the lens of Samad Iqbal's family across three crucial phases of his twin kids' “Magid- Millat” lives. Smith begins by recalling the Iqbal twins' ancestral history, particularly their father's past as a World War II soldier, their parents' journey from East London to Northwest London during their mother's pregnancy, and the twins' infancy, early adolescence, and late adolescence (Almarkhan, 2025).

The novel centres on Iqbal's family, who are completely opposed to the Jones. The parents had a typical Bangladeshi wedding that is extremely conservative in nature. Samad and his new wife had never met before their wedding, and their romantic attachment was based on mutual consent between the two families. Their marriage had been arranged before Alsana's birth in accordance with ancient Islamic traditions, although their children were born in England (Mkhailef & Abbas, 2020). The relations between Britain and those residents from previously colonised African, Asian, and Caribbean countries are the primary concern of the work in question. Through the stressful connections with others, balancing all the varied traditions that comprise regular household activities, it indicates the inevitable barriers of constituting a culture that is multifaceted. The novelist Zadie Smith gives dispersed English language instruction that transcends the diverse cultural setting of contemporary British society, an era distinguished by tension and loss of identity resulted by the arrival of primarily Asian and West Indian individuals.

One of the most significant cases of disintegrated personality within the story is Samad Iqbal, a first-generation immigrant coming from Bangladesh, who finds himself torn between his heritage of culture and his regular life in the United Kingdom. He keeps advising himself of his apparent values and sacred responsibilities, even though he rarely satisfies his own aspirations. The inner struggle of Samad embodies the overwhelming displeasure of postmodern folks separated between the new host country and their homeland. Samad's attempt to keep Magid

Bangladeshi by sending him there to live backfires, as Magid returns more Westernized than ever. This illustrates Hall's concept that identity constantly changes as a result of cultural interactions and historical forces (Nazir, Akram, & Batool, 2025). As such, Samad's longing for Bangladesh is highlighted across multiple passages, showing the variance between his idealized perspective of his home and his lived experiences in Britain.

The first generations of migrants, such as Samad, are more attached to their shared heritage by means of culture, religion, traditions, and language. Because their common cultural and religious convictions formed a collective identity, which many of them, including Samad, brought with them when they arrived in London. Yet, when Samad is in London, he modifies parts of his traditional customs (Rizgar, 2016).

As an adult, Samad found himself caught between two different backgrounds. On the one hand, he desires to keep his Muslim heritage and restore the prestige that he claims his family earlier had. On the other hand, Samad has the appearance of a white Brit, rather than that of a Muslim. Samad falls in love with Poppy, his twins' music tutor, at a school meeting. Despite being aware of Islamic beliefs, he began to masturbate in his attraction to Poppy. He is a Muslim, but he reveals little respect for his religion. He fails to provide any social connections for his children, leading to a hard interaction with his twin boys. Despite the fact that Archie is a white British, he has fewer social interactions. At his marriage ceremony, there were just two attendants. Archie was prohibited from participating in fraternity meetings with other firms at work because of his low social status and the colour of his wife. They are tightly bound to their own small area, and they cannot teach their children how to enter the real world because they are incapable of entering it themselves. In this situation, children must seek social support from someone other than their father by birth. In the context of the narrative, the Chalfen pair serve as father and mother to Majid, Millat, and Irie, supplying them with social and financial assets (Wang, 2021).

Although Iqbal's standards first become apparent in Samad's twin children's lives when they are still young, Samad, a traditional Muslim Bangladeshi, persists in bringing up his children to be real Bangladeshis and pious Muslims. He sees himself as experiencing an enormous challenge because neither of his boys feels a feeling of connection to their cultural or religious heritage. This concern becomes evident when he laments: "... Millat, thirteen, who farted in a mosque, followed blondes, and smelt of smoke, and not just Millat but all the youngsters. Mujib, fourteenth, criminal record for joyriding" (Smith, 2000, pp. 286-287). Samad Iqbal, who is living in a secular community where East meets West, struggles to blend in while keeping his traditional Muslim identity. However, modern Western society repeatedly challenges his faith, resulting in moral challenges and a troubled connection with God due to his rebellion against Islamic rule (Hadad,2025). Besides that, Samad is struggling with British culture and never felt respected or accepted in England, just tolerated. Regardless of his educational background, he only has the option of working as a restaurant server for the next part of his lifetime, simply because he is incapable of harmoniously incorporating his values and convictions with contemporary society.

As an outcome, Samad fights to navigate life in a culture that contradicts the principles of his faith, besides getting stuck between his spiritual beliefs and everyday impulses. He argues that there exists another form of Samad who is highly virtuous and sincere, even though he has to figure out how to deal with the other Samad, who remains incapable of upsetting those around him. Therefore, Samad's personality is severely impacted by his heritage of culture and religion as well.

Overall, Samad Iqbal's life journey could ultimately be thought of as a constantly evolving and insistent seeking for one's identity, constructed by moral issues, cultural clashes, and forced displacement. Samad, a first-generation immigrant from Bangladesh, battles to find his place in a liberal British society that relentlessly conflicts with his convictions about religion, values, and exalted birthplace. His inner conflict, unsatisfied desires, and an awareness of discrimination from society often impede his trying to define himself as a devout Muslim and a successful father. Magid came back more modernized, indicating the capacity for change of international connection, even though Samad's determination to protect an unchanging personality by sending him to their homeland points out the unstable nature of identity itself. Samad's feelings of despair have been intensified by this unsuccessful attempt, which clarifies the contrast between his real personality and his preferred one. Through Samad's contradictions, desire for the past, and ethical issues, Smith defines identity as an ongoing debate developed through history, migration, and daily experience.

The twins' Divergent path to selfhood

When experiencing a mix of cultures in London, racially varied groups confront numerous types of obstacles to adoption. White teeth represent the first and second generations striving to blend with cultural differences. The story stresses the crucial role of tradition and origins while tracking the lives of Muslim immigrants whose values and beliefs are influenced by British society. Alsana and Samad Miah Iqbal experienced financial challenges in Bangladesh. Magid and Millat, who have an opposite viewpoint from their parents, have a responsibility for their second-generation Muslim religion. The novel presents one of them as a member of contemporary British society and the other as having an ethnic identity (Dizayi, 2019).

Samad's sons, Magid and Millat, represent the East and the West of Samad, with some recurrent slippages. Although they are identical twins, their reactions in a similar situation are totally different. Millat does not seem bothered by their father's attempts to influence their lives and decide what they ought to do and not, while his brother gets upset and responds with a silent protest. Magid, who is the eldest by two minutes, attempts to blend in. Millat, instead of trying to blend like Magid, which he knows is going to fail, does the opposite. He joins a gang called Raggastani, where internal language is a mixture of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati, and English. The whole group is composed of a wide variety of cultures, generating a unique combination. Millat wanders through different

organizations and groups, and as a teenager, he gets in touch with a group known as KEVIN. Millat feels a sense of ancestral connection to KEVIN, an extremist Muslim group. The comic aspect of the group is that its founder was not a Muslim from the beginning. He was an extremely religious person who couldn't manage to integrate while studying Islam at the university. Additionally, the letters KEVIN, which stand for Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation, underscore the group's multifaceted nature. Since Millat dedicates more time to KEVIN, his rigid beliefs grow. Although he might not always go along with the principles of the organization, this gives him an environment in which to speak about his discontent and rage (Prakasam, 2014).

Bhabha's (1994) notion of confusion also functions as a starting point for the Iqbal twins' debate over identity. Bhabha (1994) goes further on the theory by illustrating how victims of colonization question and replicate authoritative cultural standards in addition to experiencing difficulties. The overlapping nature of the tale itself can be seen through Magid and Millat. Whereas Millat, who spent his childhood in Britain, resists Western cultural principles and follows radical Islam, Magid, who was sent to Bangladesh to acquire a formal education guided by ancestral values, surprisingly moves back more European-style and accepts a scientific approach. "I send him away to be more like me, and he comes back more like them!" complains Samad. (p 336). Bhabha's (1994) concept of imitation, which claims that indigenous individuals duplicate and contest the supremacy of the culture that is prevailing, leading to "almost the same, but not quite" (p. 76), becomes apparent in this conflict between cultures. Millat's statement to be "the face of the future" (p. 351) indicates his efforts to integrate his background of culture and British childhood. Millat's personal dispute between ancient and contemporary becomes clear when he declares, "We are the pure and the devout. "We are the future" (p. 400). His increasing disapproval is further illustrated by his conflict with his identity, as he declares, "They wanted to call him English. English!" (p. 387). Millat's discontent grows stronger when he states, "I am not English. I am not Bengali. I am not anything. "Just like Archie Jones, a man without a side" (p.411).

Smith commonly compares first-generation immigrants and their kids in order to examine the multigenerational dynamics of hybridity. The first generation, like Samad Iqbal in White Teeth, has a connection to values of cultural purity and heritage. Samad thinks that sending his son Magid to his home country, Bangladesh, will maintain traditional values while avoiding Western destruction. Yet when Magid arrives, he is more British and secular than earlier. This comical paradox stresses Smith's criticism of the "myth of return"—the concept that one can return to a pure cultural point of origin. Actually, culture is always changing, and the second generation certainly will adopt features from the host country (Nasiba, 2025). On the contrary, Millat experiences two opposing phases: First, he grows up into an attractive young man who gets involved in casual sex, uses marijuana, and becomes influenced by gangsters in television shows, which he bonds during his life. He finally chooses a darker route and joins a fundamentalist Islamic group called KEVIN - Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation (Güneş, 2024).

The second generation of immigrants is the forgotten generation, a generation that struggles to recognize where they came from so as to construct an identity, as they were also searching for an obvious goal in life. The matter emerges when the parental generation attempts to impose its own opinions on the children. Being at school, Magid, Millat, and Irie refuse to listen to their parents when requested not to participate in the Christian Harvest Festival. Magid, who is supposed to be two minutes older as well as cleverer of the twins, is secretly sent to Bangladesh to protect him from the corruption of the alien Christian community and allow him to grow into a devoted Muslim. Magid's absence creates chaos in Iqbal's family. Alansa refuses to speak to Samad personally, and Millat returns to drugs, women, and extremism. Millat feels trapped between his own inner urges, both sexual and his adherence to Islam (Kumar, 2012).

The cultural tension drives Magid and Millat to go through psychological trauma, resulting in a sense of confusion about their heritage. Following WWII, many British-born kids of immigrant families went through cultural isolation and feelings of alienation. To avoid alienation and isolation, they replicate the English, as well as creating the original culture differently, the self of colonial culture demonstrating its desire for difference and otherness in order to be recognized as superior. Samad Iqbal believes that corruption in England harmed his family and their cultural backgrounds. He says: “I have been corrupted by England, I see that now, my children, my wife, they too have been corrupted” (Köseoğlu, 2017).

Overall, the novel portrays Magid and Millat Iqbal as two completely different individuals through overlapping reactions to the same context of postcolonial hybridity and cultural dislocation, showing that identity evolution in a diverse community can be challenging and unexpected. Despite being identical twins, their varied routes reflect the weaknesses of cultural essentialism and the "myth of return" encouraged by their father, Samad Iqbal. Magid, who has been sent to his homeland with the aim of protecting his religious and cultural purity, came back much more British than his brother, emphasizing that belief systems or geographically remote areas will not safeguard ancestral traditions. On the contrary, Millat, who had been brought up in London but is still isolated, is an illustration of rejection by means of disapproval. In his ongoing seeking for an identification of meaning and belonging, he wanders between illicit activities, societal norms, and radical religion. His association with the mixed gang KEVIN affirms Bhabha's (1994) view of uncertainty and imitative behaviour, where Millat adheres to modern Western versions of political violence while criticizing dominant standards. The twins reflect the emotional and psychological fracture that second-generation immigrants encounter when confronted with ancestral customs and their present circumstances. Smith ultimately breaks down rigid binaries of East and West, tradition and modernity, asserting that neither assimilation nor fundamentalism provides a stable solution; instead, identity arises as an ongoing, contested negotiation created by history, power, and lived experience in postcolonial Great Britain.

Alsana Iqbal: Negotiating hybrid identity and everyday resistance

This paper also sheds light on how Smith portrays Alsana Begum's struggle with her children and her failure to adopt a single acculturation strategy. Alsana's difficult, hybrid identity indicates that she confronts a decision identical to Samad's: whether to pursue an independent strategy or adapt to the culture of her new nation. While Alsana's stress is caused by her concerns over her children's security, Zadie Smith describes Samad's internal battle between being captivated by contemporary culture and being devoted to his origins, roots, and religious beliefs. As a consequence, Alsana has difficulty deciding whether to encourage her children's commitment to their parents' Bengali Muslim customs or permit them to enjoy their lives freely and fully integrate into the culture of their host country.

A crucial leading lady in Zadie Smith's White Teeth (2000), Alsana Iqbal shows obstacles faced by navigating dual personalities within the environment of contemporary multiculturalism. The clash between historical retention of tradition and transformation can be observed by Alsana, a female immigrant coming from Bangladesh who lives in England. She discloses how regular interactions lead to a dynamic, frequently conflicting process of multifaceted identities, which is not a passive merging of cultures.

Displacement and cultural marginalization are significant influences in Alsana's tensions. She experiences an environment which equally opposes and restructures what she believes in after migrating to England from Bangladesh. Her insecurity springs from embracing a new culture and her growing concern for her children, whom she believes will have to compromise on their native tongue, culture, and family values. This seems to correspond to Stuart Hall's argument that one's personality is frequently in evolution, instead of being permanent or unchanging (Hall, 1990). Alsana's persona has been formed by compromises with her native nation of origin and the culture where she is staying, proving hybridity as an aspect of disagreement rather than unity.

It is believed that Alsana's main feature is resilience. In contrast to explicit opposing views, she employs language, traditions, and household environments to convey her discontent. Invisible activities of refusal encompass her continued reliance on Bengali heritage, rejection of contemporary Western culture, and physiological opposition to her children's adaptation to English. The above behaviours correspond with Homi Bhabha's views of the third space, where groups that are excluded utilize interaction and the reconsideration to question predominant attitudes about culture (Bhabha, 1994). Alsana's rejection confronts the dominance of British culture over her sense of self, rather than being absolutely in opposition to British societal norms.

Alsana additionally objects to the commonly held belief that immigrant women are quiet or obedient. She affirms her independence across both female-dominated and imperial systems with her bold character, depth of emotion, and clear sense of morality. Despite her limitations caused by her background and gender, she clearly expresses her discontent and frustrations, resulting in her refusal of everyday, actual activity. Alsana's moral character thereby indicates how insignificant but repeated behaviours of cultural affirmation retain hybrid, separate identities.

To sum up, Alsana Iqbal is an excellent portrayal of how she managed both of her identities via daily confrontation. The psychological consequences of displacement and the intricate ways that immigrants resist the authority of culture are apparent in the way she looks. White Teeth shows hybridity by introducing Alsana as a fragmented personality constructed by opposition, panic, and memory.

Conclusion

Zadie Smith's White Teeth, which describes the actual experiences of immigrant families interacting with modern British tradition, is a major condemnation of rigid and unchanging beliefs about identity. The identities of Iqbal's family have been described within the narrative as being dispersed, fragile, and shaped by continual compromise rather than genetic certainty. Samad Iqbal's uncomfortable adherence to both the Islamic faith and an imagined community showcases the mental stress experienced by first-generation immigrants struggling to protect national authenticity in a situation that frequently decreases it. The obstacles of conserving a strong sense of self in a diverse, open-minded community have been represented by his moral troubles and fruitless efforts to exert control over his children's identities.

Magid and Millat's contrasting lifestyle pathways provide evidence of how identity shifts occur in the second generation. Despite having been brought up in the same circle of relatives, their varied viewpoints on cultural dislocation, Magid's acceptance of Christian logical reasoning, and Millat's adherence to radical Islam show that one's identity is not necessarily shaped by one's native land, ruling parents, or convictions. The myth of "return" has been proven false by the tracks they adopted, indicating how the same circumstance of alienation and doubt may lead to both integration and powerful rejection. Those twins show the feelings of grief and mental dissolution suffered by immigrant children raised in London who get stuck between opposing backgrounds.

The main character of Alsana Iqbal adds much more to the current research by uncovering typical techniques of discussion and objections. In contrast with Samad's firm religious system, Alsana's fluid persona has been established by logical judgments, mental effort, and caring for her children. The opposition she displays arises at home, proving how daily activities, instead of dramatic intellectual expressions, may be employed to boost the preservation of culture.

In short, White Teeth depicts identity as an evolving and ongoing affair determined by dominance, heritage, and displacement. Zadie Smith breaks down categories regarding East and West, ancient and contemporary, and integrity and immorality in order to present British identity as pluralistic, distinct, and ever-altering. Through the Iqbal family, the story shows that diversity is a distinctive feature of contemporary society rather than an absence of membership.

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