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Affirming Complexity: *White Teeth* and Cosmopolitanism

While many buzz topics in post-colonialism, such as hybridity and multiculturalism, are often held up as cultural ideals, in *White Teeth* Zadie Smith complicates the reading of such topics by refusing to elevate them, and instead treats them satirically as inevitabilities. Her radically diverse characters brought together in the former imperial hub of London would seem to be an ideal starting point for an author who wished to sing the praises of hybridity and of theories such as cosmopolitanism, but Smith is no such author. Rather, she paints them in such a way as to push toward a more complex understanding, sometimes explicitly critiquing the expected philosophical standpoints. Smith's novel could indeed be described as a critique of cosmopolitanism, akin to that of literary critic Timothy Brennan in his article entitled "Cosmo-theory."

London gives the impression of being the perfect place for post-colonialist theories, and particularly cosmopolitanism, to find their battle ground, as it is home to a stunning amount of diversity and a complicated history. In what John Clement Ball describes in *Imagining London* as a sort of colonialism in reverse, London finds samplings of people from every corner of its once extensive empire within its city limits (Ball 15). Former colonial subjects enter the city of London, often imagining it on a wildly symbolic scale of global power and influence, and carry out their daily lives within earshot of the ringing of Big Ben. This results in a potential for interesting interactions between different players in an old power game. In his study of migrancy and hybridity, Andrew Smith notes that one result is the increasing complexity of what is meant by claiming British identity. "What makes [one] 'British' cannot be referred to essentialist or absolutist notions of nation or culture, race or ethnicity. At the very least it is clear that we can no longer hold comfortably on to the notion of a closed national culture, complete within and for itself" (A. Smith 245). He goes on to draw the conclusion that "postcolonial literary studies claims its novelty and authority, therefore, in the idea that as people move, the cultural center also moves, not in any specific direction, but in a diffusing, outward spread" (A. Smith 245). In acknowledging the complex and dynamic nature of culture, Andrew Smith sets up two essential elements of how culture plays out in *White Teeth*. London provides a meeting place of cultures, religions, and political viewpoints, and thus extends the opportunity of greater humanitarian understanding toward the characters of *White Teeth*, simply due to the city's complexity. The city itself may be, then, one catalyst for hybridity, which in turn enables the second generation of immigrant families to change so radically from their parents, merging cultures with a greater respect for coolness and popularity than for any sort of cultural heritage, history, or even desire for assimilation.

It is against such a backdrop that Smith constructs a narrative that continually and unabashedly comments on its own tendencies, shortcomings, and idiosyncrasies. I argue here that through her creation of content and setting, as well as her use of style, Smith creates in *White Teeth* a convincing critique of cosmopolitanism and other similar post-colonial perspectives on hybridity without resorting to cosmopolitanism's supposed opposite, patriotism. Quite the contrary; the novel sets both up as objects of irony and satire, implying the need for a more nuanced reading and understanding of such characters and settings.

I. Cosmopolitanism

A preliminary look at cosmopolitanism may be helpful in order to more fully understand the critique being made by Brennan and, as I argue, Smith. The philosophy of cosmopolitanism is tantalizing from a humanitarian perspective, as it seems to be a fool-proof catch-all for re-establishing human dignity and rights. Often set in contrast to a nationalistic patriotism, cosmopolitanism offers a far more tolerant lens through which literary and cultural studies can ensue. Traditionally, the theory of cosmopolitanism posits this tolerance above any allegiance to culture, history, religion, or political ideology. For cosmopolitanism, an allegiance to humanity must be maintained in order to put an end to the oppression and stereotyping that occurs in so many

domains. Already within the sense of cosmopolitanism, an implied ideal of fully hybridity and multiculturalism can be read, in which differences become backgrounded to the unity of common humanity. Despite its apparent palatability, several post-colonial literary critics hold views which complicate the theory of cosmopolitanism. As Laura Chrisman rightly notes, “Debates about the meanings of cosmopolitanism have recently intensified and expanded within and alongside postcolonial studies” (12). Chrisman lays out the perspectives of several thinkers on cosmopolitanism: Homi Bhabha seeks to clarify what is entailed in new cosmopolitanism, landing on a theory that is in the vernacular and survival-oriented (Chrisman 11); Gayatri Spivak admits an aversion to the term, labeling it a “humanist, universalist backlash... a kind of scandal of the US imaginary, the longing for the specular subject in order to be cosmopolitan” (Chrisman 12);¹ and Chinua Achebe calls into question the relationship among “imperialism, new-imperialism, violence, and the project of ‘cosmopolitics’” (Chrisman 12) while clarifying that cosmopolitanism does not empower the impoverished. Achebe defines ‘cosmopolitics’ as “what a number of liberal thinkers now advocate: a freely created, cosmopolitan cultural identity based on notions of ‘global’ citizenship” (Chrisman 157), then denounces it. “The experience of a traveller from the world’s poor places is very different whether he is travelling as a tourist or struggling to settle down as an exile in a wealthy country... Let me just say of such a traveller that he will not be able to claim a double citizenship like Gertrude Stein when she said: ‘I am an American and Paris is my hometown’ (158).² Also among the critics of the utopic tendencies of cosmopolitanism is Timothy Brennan, who argues not only that such an outlook is not helpful, but that is actually counterproductive and harmful to the cause it is trying to support. Cosmopolitanism, he argues, leads to increased cultural hegemony and thus further marginalization. Clearly, cosmopolitanism does not enjoy unanimous support among post-colonialists.

Modern cosmopolitanism is rooted in the Greco-Roman ideal of the world citizen. Essentially, the cosmopolitan is the individual who views primary allegiance as belonging to the worldwide human community rather than to country, religion, or ideology. Such an individual is set in opposition to the patriot or nationalist, whose primary allegiance is to country. In her article “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” Martha Nussbaum cites Diogenes as a primary example of this philosophy in his assertion of himself as “a citizen of the world.” The idea behind cosmopolitanism seems to be that if people find their primary identity in something not universally shared, conflict is bound to ensue. If, on the other hand, identity is located in that which unites all of humanity, all humanity will begin to work toward common ideals of justice and that which is right.

Transformed into a contemporary theory, cosmopolitanism suggests a sloughing off of history and cultural identity in order to ensure harmony and guard human rights. Rather than assume one’s own culture to be the natural norm against which other cultures are measured, Nussbaum advocates an educational system which prioritizes the local only insofar as it is morally and functionally appropriate to do so (as, she argues, in the case of caring for one’s own child rather than all children equally). Outside of these instances, a global curriculum is to be pursued, thereby increasing tolerance and understanding cross-culturally. Similarly, Benita Parry uses an interesting quotation to open her *Delusions and Discoveries* that points to the possible wisdom and flexibility to be found in borderlands:

“Those who are shut in within one society, one nation, one religion, tend to imagine that their way of life and their way of thought have absolute and unchangeable validity and that all that contradicts their standards is somehow ‘unnatural’, inferior or evil. Those, on the

¹ Originally from Meyda Yegenoglu and Mahmut Mutman, “Mapping the Present: Interview with Gayatri Spivak,” pp. 16-17.

² Originally from Chinua Achebe, “Today, the Balance of Stories,” *Home and Exile* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 92-3.

other hand, who live on the borderlines of various civilizations comprehend more clearly the great movement and the great contradictoriness of nature and society.” (Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, quoted in Parry p 29)

Both Nussbaum and here, Deutscher, recognize rightly the value that can exist in cultural variety and open-mindedness; still, the premise is not without problems.

In theory, cosmopolitanism seems to be an unequivocally positive solution to much of the complicated conflict faced by the world today. The theory begins to break down, however, when regarded from a perspective that does not shy away from complexity. In “Cosmo-Theory,” Timothy Brennan undertakes just such a reading in order to show that while cosmopolitanism typically shuns patriotism for being detrimental to the values it attempts to protect, cosmopolitanism harms its own cause as well, increasing the cultural hegemony it sets out to eliminate. The reason this occurs is because rather than re-valorize that which has been marginalized, cosmopolitanism has a tendency to merely commodify the local while continuing to observe through a Western lens. This is partially because one’s understanding of cosmopolitanism is “affected by whose cosmopolitanism or patriotism one is talking about – whose definitions of prejudice, knowledge, or open-mindedness one is referring to” (Brennan 659). Even the understanding of an anti-nationalist stance such as cosmopolitanism is rooted in and depends on a particular cultural perspective, which has been created by national and cultural understanding. Consequently, even the supposedly de-centering idea of hybridity becomes “a coercive lesson imposed on outlying populations” (Brennan 660).

Questions of national sovereignty are also central to Brennan’s argument. In considering the writings of Antonio Gramsci, Brennan remarks that “left intellectuals of [Gramsci’s] generation thought internationalism and cosmopolitanism incompatible, since internationalism acknowledges that differences of culture and polity cannot be juridically erased before the conditions exist for doing so equitably, and because internationalism insists on the principle of *national* sovereignty” (Brennan 668). Without a sense of national sovereignty, the norm continues to reside with the powerful, namely the West. Another problem Brennan finds with the idealism of cosmopolitanism is the assumption (inherent in the desire to transcend national issues) that individuals in all nations are on equal footing in regards to basic needs such as education, food, and health care. Until such foundations do become equal, lofty goals of transcendence remain not only unattainable, but irrelevant. Brennan is further skeptical of cosmopolitanism because of the economic forces that drive it silently, unacknowledged in their influence. Ultimately, Brennan’s criticism rests on the conclusion that “cosmo-theory attempts, through its own genealogical pretensions at worldliness, to override a veiled Americanism,” implying that “cosmopolitanism is the way in which a kind of American patriotism is today being expressed” (Brennan 682). In the same vein, Brennan elsewhere poses the question, “Does globalization presage a new openness to the foreign and the out-of-reach, or is it rather (and paradoxically) just the opposite: a veiled way of alluding to the Americanization of foreignness in a world dominated by US power following the fall of the Soviet Union?” (Brennan 123). If such observations are true, then cosmopolitanism can never be the tool it intends to be, for rather than erasing oppression and marginalization, it deepens them while seeming innocuous. Brennan’s proposed alternative appears to be a renewed emphasis on the social, political, economic, and social realities of a place, strengthening its sovereignty rather than erasing it into an oblivion of universality.

Though the theory of cosmopolitanism seems to be gaining popularity as a response to the myriad conflicts and tragedies world-wide (and also is lauded as a way of transcending the Western perspective in order to take a more universal outlook), Smith’s novel seems to align itself with the likes of Brennan in his critique of the utopic theory. With the stylistic flair of her alluring fiction, Zadie Smith takes up a case similar to that of Brennan as she critiques the notion of “Happy Multicultural Land” (384). Smith populates *White Teeth* with characters brimming with “hybridity”; mixed backgrounds, a variety of religions, a subsequent generation of blended cultures. This would

seem to be an ideal backdrop for a cosmopolitan viewpoint – though the characters inhabit such vastly different spheres, they are united and able to relate to one another through their common humanity. Smith, however, does not present such an idyllic conclusion. Rather, the ideas most “cosmopolitan” in nature are put in the mouths of the most satirically-depicted characters, and are shown to be untenable – indeed, ludicrous. Still, ideas of patriotism – cosmopolitanism’s supposed opposite – are also mocked in those characters who hold to their cultural and historical pasts too tightly and cannot accept the realities of their present. Even her repetition of the phrase “past-tense, future-perfect” (p 15, 83) highlights the difficulties at hand and the polarities that are most common: characters either focus on the crises of the past and become too rooted in history and localism, like Samad Iqbal, or idealize a perfect future or cosmopolitan outlook that ignores the history, like the Chalfens, Poppy Burt-Jones, and the Glenard Oak headmaster. Either perspective is faulty because it is only half the picture. By presenting both standpoints with a heavy dose of irony, Smith implicitly suggests that rather than a simple binary, a more complex, nuanced understanding is necessary. By following the threads of history, identity, hybridity, and marginalization that Smith weaves throughout the novel, the untenable nature of cosmopolitanism as laid out by Brennan becomes alive in the complexities of Smith’s characters.

II. History

Smith’s treatment of history in *White Teeth* is a first clue that her perspective will be more akin to that of Brennan than to traditional cosmopolitan theorists or others who promote hybridity as a catch-all solution to postcolonial strife. Through characters that interact with history in a variety of ways, through the structure of the novel which periodically cycles back in time, and particularly through the concrete locale of O’Connell’s Irish Pool Hall, Smith fleshes out the complicated relationship between history and former colonial societies, immigrant families, and subsequent generations of individuals with mixed backgrounds and tangled roots. Included in relationship to history is use of setting, as it is in a way of speaking the creation of new and future histories; as place plays a central role in the novel, Smith’s treatment of it is not insignificant.

To enact cosmopolitanism requires an abandonment of history, as different histories divide peoples, and reminders of history call up opposing sides on a war, betrayals, oppression and cruelty as often as cultural richness. An opposing patriotic perspective would imply, conversely, that history cannot be transcended, and that retaining all references to local histories is a positive move. Smith counters both of these ideas. The characters of *White Teeth* approach history and its role from a wide variety of standpoints, and many express a deep ambivalence within their own attitude. History, for these characters, is something of pain and oppression, yet also a source of pride; it is absent from their everyday interactions and yet inescapable in their blood. According to one analysis, “*White Teeth* is concerned with history as a motivating force and as a contestable value, and uses teeth as a narrative device and historiographical metaphor” (Squires 46-7). The image of teeth recurs throughout both the structure of the book, in the “Root Canal” chapter of each section which delves into the characters’ pasts, as well as in the content, where various descriptions of teeth take on different significations in regard to the characters’ situations. At any rate, an unwillingness to release history in favor of the present (as epitomized in the setting of O’Connell’s, where history never changes) seems to lead to stagnation, while an abandonment or ignorance of history (as in the relationship between Samad and Poppy, or in Archie’s blank outlook) can result in disaster.

The various characters of *White Teeth* hold contradictory attitudes toward history and roots. Samad Iqbal displays the most unequivocally positive view regarding his past, including country and ancestors. His is perhaps the closest to anything approaching patriotism, and Smith is quick to highlight the potential dangers of such a perspective.

If religion is the opiate of the people, tradition is an even more sinister analgesic, simply because it rarely appears sinister... To Samad, as to the people of Thailand, tradition was culture, and culture led to roots, and these were good, these were untainted principles... You

would get nowhere telling him that weeds too have tubers, or that the first sign of loose teeth is something rotten, something degenerate, deep within the gums. Roots were what saved, the ropes one throws out to rescue drowning men, to Save Their Souls. (161)

For Smith, such blind adhesion to roots and tradition seems to be narrow-minded and dangerous, and thus rules out patriotism or localism as an appropriate paradigm.

On the other hand, the eternal present of cosmopolitanism with little acknowledgment of history seems equally inappropriate in Smith's perspective, though her critique here is achieved more through tone than direct authorial intervention. Her writing suggests that the reality of past and history must be recognized in order to move forward. For example, Shiva's "enigmatic" response to why Samad's affair with Poppy cannot be sustained, that there is "too much history... Too much bloody history," hints that something ominous will come to pass if history is ignored (122). Poppy herself serves as a homogenizing force, embracing a view of tolerance devoid of historical reality; additionally, the English in general seem to be associated with a lack of historical understanding, almost a perpetual amnesia. Samad openly curses "the English goldfish-memory for history" (75), while Magid, having returned from Bangladesh, praises the same malady: "We must be more like the English. The English fight fate to the death. They do not listen to history unless it is telling them what they wish to hear" (240). Likewise, Archie's own school experience reveals a lack of reliable historical input. "Now, the average school student today is aware of the complex forces, movements, and deep currents that motivate wars and spark revolutions. But when Archie was in school the world seemed far more open to its own fictionalization" (211). Finally, when Joyce Chalfen wonders whether Millat's and Irie's parents are caring for them properly, Smith chides in parentheses, "Wrong question. It wasn't the parents, it wasn't just one generation, it was the whole century. Not the bud but the bush" (270). Each of these quips underscores both the reality of historical influence and the danger of ignoring it.

Setting and place also figure heavily into ideas of history as it provides the locale for re-living history, as well as creating new histories. *White Teeth* solidly grounds its plot in the North London suburb of Willesden Green while tackling lofty time- and border-crossing themes. Even a look at the most central characters reveals an almost absurd variety of potential marginalizations due to all the crossing of paths: English and Jamaican and Bangladeshi; Hindu, Muslim, Jehova's Witness, and Jew; multiple generations and socio-economic subgroups. Still the setting – Willesden Green – remains concrete. Alsana Iqbal demonstrates lucidity in her perspective of the notably multicultural and supposedly liberal neighborhood, a perspective that the author echoes: "Liberal? Hosh-kosh nonsense!" No one was more liberal than anyone else anywhere anyway. It was only that here, in Willesden, there was just not enough of any one thing to gang up against any other thing and send it running to the cellars while windows were smashed." (53). Smith's treatment of the diversity of Willesden Green allows space for each of the stories and tensions to be played out. Another important setting is Glenard Oak Comprehensive, which serves as a sort of geographical microcosm in which "a bridge was not enough to... slow down the student body's determination to splinter and factionalize... kids are like pissing cats or burrowing moles, marking off land within land, each section with its own rules, beliefs, laws of engagement" (241). A similar phenomenon occurs in the Jones household when fighting erupts over Irie's desire to go to Africa: "The stalemate was so pronounced that land had been divided and allocated" (312). The divisions that occur globally become more comprehensible when reduced to smaller proportions; at the same time, they appear still more futile in the pettiness that causes them.

Likewise, the setting of O'Connell's is vital to Smith's reading of history and its role. While characters fight out all their individual battles, either with or without the context of their history to aid them, O'Connell's remains a place where "everything was remembered, nothing was lost. History was never revised or reinterpreted, adapted or whitewashed. It was as solid and as simple as the encrusted egg on the clock" (160). Here, history is not a weapon or a treasure or an anomaly; it

simply is as it is. Several other places stand out as occupying central roles that foster the movement of the narrative; among these are Cricklewood Broadway (the scene of Archie's attempted suicide) and Glenard Oak Comprehensive (with its various geographical divisions and factions). Similarly, the impossibility of neutral space is an important image related to setting, particularly towards the end of the novel, as history is repeatedly portrayed as "shit" smeared over any spaces where dialogue could otherwise have taken place. "A neutral place. The chances of finding one these days are slim... The sheer *quantity* of shit that must be wiped off the slate if we are to start again as new. Race. Land. Ownership. Faith. Theft. Blood. And more blood. And more" (178). When the Iqbals attempt to create such a neutral space for a meeting between Magid and Millat,

...they make a mockery of that idea, a neutral place; instead they cover the room with history – past, present, and future history (for there is such a thing) – they take what was blank and smear it with the stinking shit of the past like excitable, excremental children. They cover this neutral room in themselves. Every gripe, the earliest memories, every debated principle, every contested belief. (183)

The imposing presence of history, it appears, cannot be denied, or it will force itself on those attempting to ignore it. In all of these instances, a strong sense of place is foregrounded and creates an anchor above which the complexities of the narrative can be at play.

Smith's perspective rings out strongly against a cosmopolitan view without reverting to a more patriotic standpoint, and she lets this opinion be known rather bluntly as she synthesizes all these troubles with history toward the end of the novel. In order to deny history in favor of an untroubled universalist standpoint, it is necessary to assume that immigrants "step into their foreign lands as *blank people*, free of any kind of baggage, happy and willing to leave their difference at the docks and take their chances in this new place, merging with the oneness of this greenandpleasantlibertarianlandofthefree. Whatever road presents itself, they will take... weaving their way through Happy Multicultural Land" (384). She continues to drive in her point, emphasizing that

...multiplicity is no illusion. Nor is the speed with which those-in-the-simmering-melting-pot are dashing toward it. Paradoxes aside, they are running, just as Achilles was running. And they will lap those who are in denial... [Zeno] wanted the One, but the world is Many. And yet still that paradox is alluring... Because this is the other thing about immigrants ('fugees, émigrés, travelers): they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow. (385)

A false sense of unity, a denial of complexity and history, for Smith is an untenable and ignorant point of view. Cosmopolitanism, in other words, cannot function, for it glosses too easily over the past.

III. Definition and Identity

Along with history itself, a character's relationship to history – be it a tight link or a willful erasure – can often be distinguished in the way that character identifies him- or herself. The way that characters identify themselves and one another gives an insightful glimpse into how they perceive their relationship to society, particularly in regards to issues concerning assimilation. Some characters emphasize their Englishness, others their foreignness; some thrive on concrete definition, others are incapacitated by decision-making. The simple variety of personal definition undoes the possibility of a cosmopolitan outlook, as many of the characters are unwilling to forego their cultural background to instead devote themselves as citizens of humanity, but this is in no way seen as negative in the novel. On the contrary, decisiveness and a sense of self seem to be prized, and give characters an edge of strength.

In contrast to this strength of decisiveness and definition, it is only Archie, whose blandness is perhaps his most prominent characteristic, who seems unable to make a decision or figure out who he thinks himself or even others to be. Archie relies on flipping coins for all major decisions,

and was otherwise “never able to make a decision, never able to state a position” (45). In regard to his personal relationships, Archie recognized the way that people were typically categorized culturally, yet did not see how those categories applied to people he actually knew. ““For God’s sake, they’re not *those* kind of Indians’... Samad and Alsana Iqbal, who were not *those* kind of Indians (as, in Archie’s mind, Clara was not *that* kind of black), who were, in fact, not Indian at all but Bangladeshi...” (46). In doing so, he may have avoided stereotyping, but denied the cultural reality of those he knew well, isolating them from their backgrounds. At one point, faced by Samad’s strong sense of connection with his ancestors, Archie acknowledges Samad’s past and recognizes that his own bloodline lends itself more to blankness than to pride. “ ‘Well, well. That’s something, isn’t it?...To have a bit of history in your blood like that. Motivates you, I’d imagine. I’m a Jones, you see. ‘Slike a ‘Smith’. We’re nobody...’ ” (85-6). This nobody-ness pervades Archie’s outlook, and is indirectly critiqued by the author in her depiction of public response to the outcasts of society, those on the street with an air of craziness about them. Rather than look directly at them, see them, and admit some recognition of who they are, Smith critiques the city-dwellers for relying on a voluntary blindness to cushion them from reality. “Our gut instinct is that they intend to embarrass us, that they’re out to *shame* us somehow... As a kind of preemptive defense mechanism, Londoners have learned not to look, never to look” (146). In this sense a lack of definition is a shield to avoid shame, and Smith clearly paints it as cowardice.

Other characters, conversely, feel a powerful desire to define, to make known who they are. Clara’s first criticism of Willesden Green, for instance, is that it is not easy to define. “What kind of a place *was* this? That was the thing, you see, you couldn’t be *sure*” (40). This lack of definition instills in Clara a sense of unease. Samad also longs to make known who he is and what his past entails, and though Smith seemed critical of his tight grasp on history, her depiction of him in his quest for definition is far more sympathetic, almost admirable. Only in highlighting his past can Samad restore his own dignity, for in London he feels he is a faceless, physically broken foreigner working a job requiring no education. To combat this feeling of meaninglessness, Samad wants ...desperately to be wearing a sign, a large white placard that said: ‘I am not a waiter. I have been a student, a scientist, a soldier, my wife is called Alsana, we live in East London but we would like to move north. I am a Muslim but Allah has forsaken me or I have forsaken Allah, I’m not sure. I have a friend – Archie – and others. I am forty-nine but women still turn in the street. Sometimes.’ (49)

This definition Samad gives himself is telling in that it underscores many aspects of his past and present, some culturally bound, others simply emphasizing his humanity (as in friendship with Archie and physical attractiveness), and the combination has a powerful humanizing effect, removing him from the anonymity of categorical definition. He also strong-arms having any sort of assimilation forced on him, asserting his identity through his name: “Don’t call me Sam... I’m not one of your English matey-boys. My name is Samad Miah Iqbal. Not Sam. Not Sammy. And not – God forbid – Samuel. It is *Samad*” (94). Smith validates this aspect of Samad’s character when she pits him in confrontation with Mad Mary. Rather than the blindness preferred by so many Londoners, Samad does not avert his gaze; rather, he touches her, thus recognizing both her existence and their own encounter. He responds to her prophecy in kind, touting that “we are split people... in the end, your past is not my past and your truth is not my truth and your solution – it is not my solution” (150). His response to her, with which Smith seems to sympathize, acknowledges complexity and flies in the face of the typical desire to avoid a problem rather than recognize and solve it (or live with it unsolved). Smith’s unspoken comparison is arguably between the way the public treats those who are outwardly crazy, and the way they respond to those who are outwardly of a different culture. While a cosmopolitan outlook would be likely to ignore differences (but thus deny the full humanity and experience of many), Smith suggests that only in direct confrontation and acknowledgement can a person’s identity be validated.

IV. Hybridity and Cosmopolitanism

Even beyond her treatments of history and identity, Smith more directly deals with ideas of hybridity (and, arguably, cosmopolitanism) with a heavily satirical hand. The few characters who seem to take a genuinely cosmopolitan stance, idealizing hybridity – namely Joyce Chalfen, Poppy Burt-Jones, and the high school headmaster – are painted as laughable, idealistic, or naïve, while more complex characters oppose them from a variety of viewpoints. Additionally, each character who is more “cosmopolitan” in outlook is also decidedly Western, which seems to support Brennan’s idea that cosmopolitanism, though ostensibly shedding Western bias, is still profoundly Western in its implementation. Smith also presents hybridity not as an ideal, but as a simple reality, and, as such, reveals the foolishness of praising it or striving for it. Her perspective echoes that of Brennan, who notes in his chapter of Neil Lazarus’ book (*The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*) that much of post-colonial thought swallows hybridity both as something positive and something inevitable:

“Without ever questioning the fundamental self-contradiction of the move, the modernist then vigorously urges on a future that *should* unfold (because it is good) while simultaneously arguing that it *must* unfold (because it is inevitable). This style of thinking informs both globalization theory and postcolonial studies.” (Brennan 122)

Another strong critic of the move towards idealizing hybridity is Patrick Colm Hogan, who questions it on two fronts. First, he attributes the valorization of hybridity to the “unfortunate tendency” to “prefer whatever is perceived as the ‘middle’ between two standard alternatives” (4). Often in such cases, he argues, the middle ground still exhibits the same problems found on either end. Additionally, he pegs hybridity as “another hegemonic identity category, with all the paraphernalia of a regulatory ideal, defining an elite group that establishes what genuine hybridity is, and so on” (12). He argues that it becomes another binary category, and so does not achieve what it is purported to by many. In *White Teeth*, Smith presents a range of responses to hybridity, not unlike these varied critical responses. She approaches the theme using a variety of tones, from a satirical glimpse at characters who swallow liberalism whole, to a tragic treatment of Samad in his intense fear of losing his culture, to a more reasonable and directly authorial look at the reality of multiculturalism and the consequences that ensue.

Much of the discourse on what could be called cosmopolitanism centers around the school system, the Chalfen family, and Archie (to a certain degree), and in no case is the perspective a respected one. These characters seem to be experts at simplification as a way of dealing with changing cultural portraits. First, in the PTA meeting, the organizer momentarily worries that she may be acting “unfair or undemocratic, or worse still *racist* (but she had read *Colour Blind*, a seminal leaflet from the Rainbow Coalition, she had scored well on the self-test), racist in ways that were so deeply ingrained and socially determining that they escaped her attention. But no, no” (106). The pamphlet has assuaged her conscience; the issue has been dealt with and can be swept aside. In the same vein, Poppy Burt-Jones attempts to smooth over cultural differences, but her admonishing hints of condescension and, as seen above, a fear of looking directly at the issue at hand. Attempting to bring about tolerance in her classroom, she chides, “I don’t think it is very nice to make fun of *somebody else’s culture*... Sometimes we find other people’s music strange because their culture is different from *ours*... But that doesn’t mean it isn’t equally good, now does it?” (129). Poppy is so intent on the idea of multiculturalism that she fails to realize that the cultural image she projects onto Magid and Millat does not resemble their reality.

Still, the most explicit and ludicrous promotion of hybridity comes from Joyce Chalfen through her gardening advice. “Cross-pollination produces more varied offspring, which are better able to cope with a changed environment... If my one-year-old son is anything to go by (a cross-pollination between a lapsed-Catholic horticulturalist feminist and an intellectual Jew!), then I can certainly vouch for the truth of this” (258). The irony of this statement, however, is that while Joyce

is tremendously proud of her own experimentation in hybridization and is outwardly fascinated by Millat and Irie because of their multicultural backgrounds, she does not seem to trust that they are in fact “better able to cope” with their situations and insists on trying to patch things up. Her surface-level interest in other cultures, being divorced from any deep understanding of historical realities, comes off as lacking sincerity and does more harm than good. Archie’s perspective presents a similar problem in that while he hopes for peace in a vague, general way, he has no understanding of what would have to be overcome in order to attain it. This naïveté is revealed in conversations with Samad, whose sense of cultural heritage is clearly much more intense. Samad critiques Alsana’s sisters’ families, who have “no respect for tradition. People call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption!” (159). In response, “Archie tried to look shocked and then tried disgusted, not knowing what to say. He liked people to get on with things, Archie. He kind of felt people should just live together, you know, in peace or harmony or something” (159). Both Archie and Joyce approach topics within multiculturalism or hybridity with a breezy stance, but (perhaps due to their Western perspective?) are unable to actually grasp the complexity of the situations they critique, which Smith makes clear through the tone used with each character.

If Poppy, Joyce, and Archie represent a satirized cosmopolitan standpoint, Samad stands in for a more patriotic view. Smith presents his perspective with a good deal more sympathy and complexity than the cosmo characters, but ultimately denies the efficacy of his approach. Coupled with Samad’s point of view, unlike the lightheartedness (and sometimes arrogance) of the characters above, is a deep-seeded fear of losing identity. Understandably so – Samad has already been displaced in such a way that much of his identity has been swept away, leaving intact only his cultural heritage, which he consequently guards preciously. At the end of his time in the war, Samad laments, “I’m fit for nothing now, not even Allah...What am I going to do? Go back to Bengal? Or to Delhi? Who would have such an Englishman there? To England? Who would have such an Indian? They promise us independence in exchange for the men we were. But it is a devilish deal” (95). He ends up in England, fiercely proud of his rebel great-grandfather Mangal Pande, for “When a man has nothing but his blood to commend him, each drop of it matters, matters terribly; it must be jealously defended” (212). Alsana criticizes his unbending stance, encouraging him to live and let live, but he retorts that “It is not a matter of letting others live. It is a matter of protecting one’s culture, shielding one’s religion from abuse” (195). Smith’s sympathy for this defensive posture (and her simultaneous recognition of sometimes difficult reality of hybridity) comes through clearly and somewhat didactically:

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow, and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment... Children with first and last names on a direct collision course... Yet, despite all this mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other’s lives with reasonable comfort... it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English... But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears – dissolution, *disappearance*. (271)

A hint of pessimism not unlike Samad’s can be heard in the authorial voice when she wonders whether “maybe nothing that happens upon stolen ground can expect a happy ending” (299). Still, Samad’s battle comes off as fairly petty and separatist. Smith mocks his patriotic musings when, during a devastating storm, “[Samad] was just in the process of happily formulating some allegory regarding the bending Eastern reed versus the stubborn Western oak when the wind reasserted itself, knocking him sideways” (185). It seems that while Smith (and the reader) can sympathize with Samad’s point of view, finding it understandable and legitimate, his perspective is not an adequate means of resolving the existing tensions.

For Smith, the greatest potential for understanding and healing arguably lies in a full recognition of complexity, denying neither past nor present, acknowledging the variety of influences that come into play and the mixed emotions concerning both mother country and adoptive country. The images of tangled roots and root canals are important tools for this perspective. As Alsana wisely points out to Clara during their simultaneous pregnancies, “‘The past is made of more than words, dearie... these bumps’ – Alsana pats them both – ‘they will always have daddy-long-legs for fathers. One leg in the present, one in the past. No talking will change this. Their roots will always be tangled. And roots get dug up’” (68). Alsana later re-emphasizes the impossibility of purity during an argument with Samad over his cultural elitism, reminding him that “‘you could go back and back and back and it’s still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It’s a fairy tale!’” (196). If hybridity is ubiquitous and unavoidable, it would follow that it is neither something to work towards nor something to avoid, but merely a fact that must be accepted and dealt with. Smith also highlights the fact that movement, trauma, and repetition are inherent in the immigrant experience.

Immigrants have always been particularly prone to repetition... Even when you arrive, you’re still going back and forth; your children are going round and round. There’s no proper term for it – *original sin* seems too harsh; maybe *original trauma* would be better. A trauma is something one repeats and repeats, after all, and this is the tragedy of the Iqbals – that they can’t help but reenact the dash they once made from one land to another, from one faith to another, from one brown mother country into the pale, freckled arms of an imperial sovereign. (135-6)

In such turmoil of movement, roots inevitably do get tangled. Samad, in a rare moment of intercultural acceptance (brought on by his illicit relationship with Poppy), envisions this tangledness as a coconut, which he presents to Poppy as a gift. “‘It is a mixed-up thing,’” he tells her, “‘with juice like a fruit but hard like a nut. Brown and old on the outside, white and fresh on the inside. But the mix is not, I think, bad’” (139). These exchanges are some of the few that are not tinged with irony or satire, which gives the impression that they are most credible. Neither a naïve hope for harmony that transcends differences nor a narrow-minded fixation on the past suffice as paradigms. As Squires notes in a paraphrase of Homi Bhaba, “‘the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’ must mean ‘as a result of and including’ rather than simply ‘afterward’ or even ‘in opposition to’” (44). Moving forward cannot occur in a healthy manner if it includes erasure of the past.

V. Marginalization and Second Generation

Finally, Smith implicitly refutes cosmopolitanism as an effective philosophy in highlighting the myriad forms of marginalization that occur above and beyond those that are culture-bound. In this regard, a simple stance of world citizenship is not enough to overcome the countless ways in which injuries are opened, both intra- and inter-culturally. People become estranged from those around them for a thousand reasons; “‘A distance was establishing itself, not simply between *fathersons, oldyoung, borntherebornhere*, but between those who stayed indoors and those who ran riot outside’” (182). In *White Teeth*, these forms of marginalization are seen most strongly in regards to generational differences, and encompass racial and cultural insensitivities as well as disputes regarding sexual mores, popularity, religion, and simple communication failures.

For those in *White Teeth*’s second generation, including Irie, Millat, Magid, and Joshua Chalfen (among others), the tension between past and present home is less intense than for their parents; instead, occupying the forefront of their adolescent angst are the same issues that plague their classmates, though often in a way that is influenced by their cultural backgrounds (which they sometimes want to flee). Irie’s response to these tensions is considered with particular attention as her perspective is explored in an entire section. Throughout her section she struggles to understand her identity and come to a position of self-acceptance, seeing only that “‘there was England, a

gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land” (222). Her struggle includes not only issues of culture and heritage, but also (and perhaps more acutely) insecurity regarding physical appearance, relationship with her family, and a heightening sense of independence. All these things merge in her to leave her feeling completely isolated in a way that no theories of allegiance to humankind could mend. For Irie’s peers, the most certain way of overcoming any form of isolation was through physical beauty, as in Millat’s case, for that transcends any otherwise-held stereotypes. “In Glenard Oak Comprehensive, black, Pakistani, Greek, Irish – these were races. But those with sex appeal lapped the other runners. They were a species all of their own” (224). This method worked for Millat; Irie, however, lacked that appeal and therefore had to consider her situation in a more thorough manner. She sees roots as a major part of the complication, particularly as her father lives so much in the past, and longs to be “separated from the chaotic, random flesh of her own family and transgenically fused with another. A unique animal. A new breed” (284). Perhaps she in some way succeeds in creating such a rift, in that she will bear a child whose father can never be known, and thus whose roots can never be ascertained. At any rate, the concerns of the second generation are so vastly different from those of the first that it does not seem that any one theory can address them both. Marginalization occurs on countless planes, not only that of culture, and again must be recognized in its complexity rather than artificially reduced to the simplest possible solution.

To conclude, many of the themes treated by Smith lead to the possibility of reading *White Teeth* as a critique of cosmopolitanism and a call to increased awareness of complexity of the situations of the characters. In contrast with cosmopolitanism’s utopic view of the salvific power of acting as a citizen of humankind, Smith’s work encourages a more thorough consideration of the various influences and realities that merge in any single character. Her treatments of history, identity, hybridity, and marginalization, by engaging different tones and eliciting reader sympathy or satirizing each character, all seem to point to the necessity of balance rather than a strictly patriotic or cosmopolitan view. One of the main problems with cosmopolitanism is its homogenizing effect, which originated with the Stoic philosophers. According to this view, any individual was surrounded by

...a series of concentric circles. The first one is drawn around the self; the next takes in one’s immediate family; then follows the extended family; then, in order, one’s neighbors or local group, one’s fellow city-dwellers, one’s fellow countrymen – and we can easily add to this list groupings based on ethnic, linguistic, historical, professional, gender and sexual identities. Outside all these circles is the largest one, that of humanity as a whole.

(Nussbaum)

The role of cosmopolitanism, then, according to Nussbaum’s citation of Stoic philosopher Hierocles, is that “our task as citizens of the world will be to ‘draw the circles somehow toward the center,’ making all human beings more like our fellow city dwellers, and so on” (Nussbaum). Perhaps this would indeed lead to greater tolerance, but at the expense of understanding the full richness of individuals outside one’s innermost circles. If one agrees with Brennan’s critique of this philosophy, cosmopolitanism is not merely an insufficient way of regarding issues surrounding multiculturalism. Instead, it may have “prompted some of these very symptoms” of intolerance in today’s world. Cosmopolitanism claims a global outlook but remains deeply Western in many ways, and ends by commodifying the local rather than accepting its validity. Smith’s fictional world reflects an outlook similar to Brennan’s, presenting ideas that are congruent with cosmopolitanism only when coated in irony and satire, and emphasizing instead the importance of allowing for a wide variety of influences – including clashes between the traditional and the modern – to make up the fabric of each individual.

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