

**Negotiation and Hybridization:
Constructing Immigrant Identities in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth***

The recent migrant crisis in Europe has caused large debates in all spheres of society concerning the possible impact on Europe of large migrations from the East. Despite the obvious questions about the economic ability of the countries to accommodate the migrants, the problems of their cultural assimilation also puzzle the scholars. How can people who have to move away from their home, traditions, habits and rituals be accepted in society? How do they themselves accept the new rules and norms of the other dominant culture? And most importantly, is there a possibility that those marginal cultures can subvert the dominant ones?

Political attitudes towards mass immigration have changed over time from the ideas of the “wholesome assimilation” to the models of multiculturalism that enable the immigrants “to retain a sense of their original cultures while adapting to the new cultural background.”¹ Assimilation of those who immigrate had been perceived as a natural process of gradual blending of nations and ethnicities within another culture, until the concept was scrutinized and was slowly rejected, since assimilation is always giving privilege to one nation over another, which devalue immigrants’ minority cultures.² Nowadays we are more likely to discuss those issues in the context of multiculturalism, which is seen as a way to respond to cultural and religious diversity.

Multiculturalism is not a mere toleration – it is the positive recognition and accommodation of ethnical groups³ with respect to their ethnical and religious differences. Even though multiculturalism is an umbrella term characterizing “claims of a wide range of disadvantaged groups,”⁴ most theorists of multiculturalism tend to focus on immigrants who are ethnic, religious minorities or minority nations. In this respect multiculturalism is close to identity politics, as it is also attempting to re-evaluate “disrespected identities” and change the ways in which those marginalized groups are represented within the society. However, the voices stating that multiculturalism is in crisis nowadays become more prominent; it is criticized mainly for the desire for the preservation of cultures⁵ as it becomes obvious that in the modern world of globalization the long interactions between cultures unconditionally cause *cultural hybridity*, especially in the societies which experienced mass migrations.

It is safe to state that the immigrants in reality tend to experience a mixture of assimilation and multiculturalism shaped by the context of their migration: by some individual issues such as class, gender and religion of the immigrants, the economic and political circumstances of the migration.⁶ In Great Britain mass migrations from the East took place in the 1950s and later, changing the “face of the British society” which by that time had been primarily

1 Nick Bentley, *Edinburgh Critical Guides to Literature: Contemporary British Fiction*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) 17.

2 *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, entry “Immigration” <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/immigration/>>

3 *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, entry “Multiculturalism” <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/multiculturalism/>>

4 *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, entry “Multiculturalism” <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/multiculturalism/>>

5 *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, entry “Multiculturalism” <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/multiculturalism/>>

6 Bentley, 18.

white.⁷ In the years following the Second World War the immigrants from the Caribbean, South East Asia and Africa arrived and settled in the suburban areas of the country. It is obvious that at a time those large migrations caused the anxieties in the society and the questions of identity and self-determination of the immigrants became a rather significant issue. It is usually suggested that cultural theory started to explore the concepts of immigrant identities since the 1990s⁸ and the postcolonial theory became increasingly relevant for the interpretation of the processes of identity negotiation of the immigrants in Britain.

That era of postcolonial migration in Britain, which started in 1950s, resulted by the end of twentieth century in Britain's claimed multiculturalism, characterized by the presence of citizens of different ethnicities, especially those coming from ex-colonial territories.⁹ So it is possible to state that British multiculturalism is an outcome of Britain's colonial past.¹⁰ Hence, certain ideas of postcolonial theory can be useful in exploring the immigrant identities in post-war Britain, such as, for example Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity¹¹ – it refers to the way in which two or more cultures combine in colonial and postcolonial relationships, “but in doing so, refuse to privilege any one of the constituent parts.”¹² This is applicable to the children of “mixed-race marriages” who could be described as hybrids in the cultural sense – they are not the combination of the “binary oppositional” cultures, but rather new form, the mixture of multiple elements that contributed to their formation.¹³

The above mentioned concepts of hybrid immigrant identities in the context of British multiculturalism and in the light of Britain's colonial past have been explored in the British literature of the recent decades, as the literature is the cultural space which gives opportunities to “articulate the immigrant experiences.”¹⁴ The novels written within the diasporas by first or second generation immigrants during the last two decades have become the marketing phenomena, which “shape[s] global imagination of other cultures as read by global audiences.”¹⁵ They are opening up the immigrants' challenges showing “that literature can become a powerful means of crosscultural communication between significantly diverse groups.”¹⁶ A rather significant number of writers who have immigrated to Britain or who are the children of those immigrants have produced novels which explore the issues of immigrants' identities from the experiences of people who “abandon the homeplace in search for the new home.”¹⁷ Being the second generation immigrant herself, in 2000 Zadie Smith published a well-received novel *White Teeth*, where the themes of constructing immigrant identity within the restrictive

7 Bentley, 17.

8 Bentley, 16-20.

9 Irene Pérez Fernández, “Exploring Hybridity and Multiculturalism: Intra and Inter Family Relations in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*”, *Odisea*, no. 10, ISSN 1578-3820, 2009, 143-154, 144.

10 Bentley, 19-20.

11 Bentley, 20.

12 Bentley, 20.

13 Bentley, 20.

14 Bentley, 18.

15 Hana Waisserová, “Transnationality in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*”, *Zlín Proceedings in Humanities* (Zlín: Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně, 2012) 270.

16 Waisserová, 270.

17 Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 1-12.

boundaries of dominant culture play an enormous role. Caught between the cultures, uncertain and confused about their role in the society, those immigrants, “displaced persons”¹⁸ in *White Teeth* experience the identity crisis, lose their sense of identity, and through the process of identity negotiation they construct the new ones usually called *hybrid identities*. Hence, this master thesis will examine the novel *White Teeth* addressing the complicated issues of immigrant identities in the context of multiculturalism especially with regard to the theories on hybrid identities and hybrid cultures.

Smith is usually placed among the authors who explore the cultural hybridity within the British society as her novel’s characters are the “epitome of hybridity and cultural diversity”¹⁹ – they are multi-ethnic and multi-racial. She addresses a multiplicity of immigrants’ identities²⁰ within the contemporary multicultural British society, and, which is particularly important for the present thesis, Smith’s novel provides a large scale of social contexts to elaborate on different immigrants’ identity constructs. Firstly, *White Teeth* covers a significant time period from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, namely the three periods of the Second World War, the post-war years and the late 90s,²¹ telling the story of multiple characters, both men and women. This is particularly important for exploring both time and gender differences in constructing immigrant identities, as, for example, Samad Iqbal and his wife Alsana construct their identities differently, in accordance with the gender roles of traditional Muslim family. Secondly, the variety of characters allows the reader to follow two generations of immigrants in Britain. This can help to trace the differences of the identity constructions of first and second generations of the immigrants, namely the shift in the perception of the society by the immigrants themselves. For example, Millat and Magid, the representatives of the second generation, were already born in a different environment, in the world where the hybridization and multiculturalism are perceived as norms. The generation gap between the characters also gives space to speculation about the role of the past, namely the past of the abandoned homeplace, in the lives of individuals: for example, the connection with home and its traditions clearly loses its significance for the second generation, as they are the children, who have never been to the country of their origin and who create their vision of that country only based on their parents’ memories and the stereotypes of the social stratum around them. The non-linear narration of the novel together with spatial diversity of the action enables to follow the development of the characters through different stages of their lives. Furthermore, the close family ties between the main characters give an opportunity of examining not only the role of the society, but also the role of family in creating the individual identity formation. For example, Smith provides the reader with three families with different origins – the Anglo-Jamaican Joneses, the Bangladeshi Iqbals and the White-Jewish Chalfens – which roughly corresponds to the three main flows of immigrants to Britain²² and gives place for the comparison of their identity formations. Moreover, the religion also plays an important role in shaping some characters’ identities, especially in providing the sense of belonging for the first generation. And, finally, when talking about constructing immigrant identities one cannot avoid touching upon the theme of racism in the society as it contributes to the immigrants’ sense of alienation. It may be argued that the main reason for the alienation is the threat posed by immigration on the British society: the fear that “the uniqueness of Englishness”, the purity of the nation can be “diluted”²³ by the immigrant

18 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1992) 124.

19 Fernández, 144.

20 Fernández, 146.

21 Fernández, 144.

22 Fernández, 146.

23 Bc. Helena Kostohryzová, *The Immigrants’ Search for National Identity in Novels by Andrea Levy and Zadie Smith*, master thesis, (Brno: Masaryk University, 2007), full text available at <https://is.muni.cz>, 11.

cultures. And due to that sense of alienation, estrangement and the amount of stereotyping they face on a daily basis the immigrants develop hybrid identities.

The immigrants in the book have to reconstruct their identities in accordance with the environment they are living in: on one hand, they need to adapt to the culture to be economically prosperous; on the other hand, they feel the need to come to terms with their ethnical, religious and racial difference because the feeling of dissolution and disappearance is enhanced when they do not feel their roots. They usually try to imitate the new culture, yet their imitations seem to be inharmonious, it is a camouflage which produces strange mixtures of experiences of living in Britain together with the “remnants of colonial history and heritage”:²⁴ just as Alsana Iqbal, who is wearing running shoes with her sari. And that mimicry as a hybridizing process in the novel demands analysis and is to be examined together with its products — hybrid identities — combinations, mixtures, products of cultural blending. This is different from the models of multiculturalism which proclaims that monoethnic individuals are combined to create a multicultural nation,²⁵ it rather suggests the idea of a new kind of hybrid immigrant individual, which can be seen as a new ethnicity of the contemporary society.²⁶ In case of *White Teeth* a special accent on hybridity of immigrants` identities with special regard to the theory of identity negotiation seems to be a rather novel approach as the previous studies of the novel were focused on other aspects, such as nationality, constructing space or constructing myths about their homeplaces, while the identity negotiation and hybridization leave place for further analysis.

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24 Bc. Marta Dongresová, *Immigrants in the Metropolis*, master thesis, (Prague: Charles University in Prague: 2015), full text available at “Repozitář závěrečných prací” <https://is.cuni.cz> 58.

25 Bentley, 53.

26 Bentley, 54.

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