Identity and Cultural Translation in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000)

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Whenever we talk about the art/ act/ practice of translation, we normatively think of transference of a text between two languages. Keeping in mind the etymological meaning of "translation", originating from the Latin, meaning "carrying over", such transference is seldom neutral and free from violent politics. But one must also be attuned to the matrix, that a translation does not necessarily involve two languages, but two cultures and sometimes two different historical epochs. Recent studies seem to go beyond the limitations of transference or translations across two languages, into an engagement across literary/ artistic genres and try to uncover the process/ politics behind such an interaction.

For the purpose of this paper, I would be looking into the cultural turn in translation studies. The focus would be not on how texts are interpreted and translated across two different cultures, but how, in the globalised world of today, we are looking at the translational nature of human settlement and livelihood. With borders simultaneously having become fluid and rigid, and an increase in migrancy as well as indentured/ unpaid/ invisibilised labour in countries in the Middle East and across Europe, we are left with staring at what Rushdie cheekily terms "translated men" in *Imaginary Homelands* (17).

The text I shall be discussing is Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* (2000). Set in multicultural London, and spanning across two generations, it tells the story of families whose roots lie in the Indian subcontinent and Jamaica. My focus would be on the problematics of identity formation in a rapidly changing world, keeping in mind the influx of South Asians and people from the Caribbean islands into the United Kingdom in the 1970s and the subsequent race riots and violence against the coloured community, and the retaliatory riots. In a world obsessed with etching borders to cement the "Us/ Them" binary, it is imperative to realise the translatedness of the human condition, something that Bhabha evokes in *The Location of Culture* as the "translational Transnational" (173).

In an article titled "Appropriating the 'Other': Some Challenges of Translation and its Theories", Keya Majumdar identifies the paradigm shift that has taken place and the way in which the act of translation is no more merely the transference of lexical and semiotic meaning from one language to the other. She observes,

> The Theory of Translation or Translational Theory is a serious reflection on the changing configuration of the socio-cultural scene, in a climate charged with unusual dynamism and vitality. Translation as such, has come a long way from 'carry over' of meaning in a linguistic activity to the present position of an 'intellectual activity' which is almost identical with the transposition of culture, where transformation is a rule, not fixity. (163)

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) represents a mosaic of ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse characters – mainly, Anglo-Jamaican, Bangladeshi and Jewish – "adjusting, negotiating and creating a sense of "Britishness" and a sense of belonging in the city of London at three different historical periods of time: the Second World War and post-war years, the period of social changes of the 1980s, and the late 1990s" (Fernandez 143). With globalisation bringing people together like never before, the erasure of borders and boundaries and the proliferation of information, the world is constantly becoming a shrinking space. That space has now come to problematise and subvert essentialist notions of national identity and belonging, which ironically can also be seen as a retrotopia[1]-obsessed response in surge to the phenomenon of globalisation and its assymetrical partitions, uninhibitions. We must also keep in mind the recent influx of migrants and political refugees seeking asylum from war ravaged countries and the hovering, spectral presence of labourers without proper paperwork, marginalised and restricted to the dark underbellies of the societal ladder, hailing from the Third World, and affecting the singularly monolithic racial presence and profiling of a particular metropolis, especially in cities like London. As Bhabha remarks, "It is to the city that the migrants, the minorities, the diasporic come to change the history of the nation … it is the city which provides the space in which emergent identifications and new social movements of the people are played out" (Bhabha *Nation and Narration* 243).

This movement of populations not only brings about changes in the mosaic of a nation, but also entail a challenge regarding the construction of the "self" for the people who suddenly find themselves in an apparently alien land. Zadie Smith in *White Teeth* (2000) focusses on these issues and more. In a world where boundaries are simultaneously vanishing and entrenching themselves, the novelist traces the migrant's conflict between identity crisis (nowhere) and new cultural hybridity (everywhere). Applying a sartorial metaphor, the new identity now needs to be stitched and sewn to meet the demands of a culture that is now staring at their face. If "translation" is the literal carrying over, then by extension, this is identity being borne across, something that Rushdie intensely advocates, and which I am going to touch upon in the course of this article.

The fluidity of international boundaries and borders has facilitated the movement of people, commodities and capital throughout the world. As Pramod K. Nayar points out, "Globalization can be seen as a mechanism that also results in the merging of cultural practices, the assimilation of the foreign into the native and the encounter between different cultures" (Nayar 178). The resultant identity formation is one that is protean, constantly in flux and one which is "like a palimpsest with endless layers." (Chaudhuri "On Translation or Carrying Over" 27).

The driving question for the immigrant is whether this entails that the newly charted route would mean a dissociation from the roots or whether the new environment and culture would be responsible for a bricolage kind of identity. Rushdie states that, "It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained" (Rushdie 17). Translation therefore no longer remains a text in a source language being made available in a different target/ host language of a different culture and time but rather extends itself into the "process and conditions of human migrancy" in a globalised world. (Trivedi 5).

Immigrants live a double problem: their own blending with other people in the new culture and their keeping the family connected to their own heritage culture. Problems arise when the young generation adopts the behaviours and beliefs of the new culture. The struggle is in keeping a balance between the enculturation process, which links immigrant individuals to the cultural contexts they have left behind and the acculturation process, which individuals undergo in response to a changing cultural context.

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[1] The term "retrotopia" has been inspired by Zygmunt Bauman's 2017 title *Retrotopia* published by Polity Press. Bauman's retrotopia is his translation of Thomas More's "utopia" for a late capitalist world, it refers to the contemporary, globally emergent architecture of disenchantment with the absurd inequities of modernity. The disenchanted look back to a perfected, menacing past designed as future goalpost for a particular location, or nation.

"The “past tense, future perfect” mood of *White Teeth* muffles the ongoing collision of incompatible, often mutually hostile, histories and identities in multicultural London (Supriya Nayar 3). The conservative model of a traditional British family – white, middle-class, protestant – as the pillar of society is put into question in Smith’s narrative through the inclusion of other household representations that point towards an inherent multicultural dimension of British society. There is a “celebratory” aspect to multicultural relations represented in Smith’s work since “Smith has found a way of harnessing the novel’s capacity to embrace heterogeneity, and has used it to give convincing shape to her presentation of an evolving, and genuinely multicultural Britain” (Head 107).

The post-colonial impact on erstwhile countries has promoted immigration crossing national and cultural boundaries. The immigrants routinely encounter colonial hangover, cultural shock, and cultural assimilation or refutation. The substantial immigration from the commonwealth countries especially from south Asia, Africa, and Caribbean islands to England has resulted in the rise of London as a new ethnic melting-pot. The Bangladeshi Muslim Samad Iqbal and the Anglo Jamaican migrant Clara Bowden and her daughter Irie and their intertwined histories and families all create a polyphony of voices, and drives a fissure into the concept of a monolithic identity, which far from being essentialist and homogeneous is presented as “myriad and adventitious” and irreducible to “a single cultural sense’” (Sell 34).

What we find in *White Teeth* is that cultures like language are always in flux. During the 1970’s and 1980’s, whenever England played India or the West Indies (the Caribbean cricket team), loyalties were divided so much so, that there would be a sizeable non-English crowd turning up at every game to voice their support for their native countries. This continued through to the 1990s and the new millennium causing a great deal of consternation to the English hard liners for whom it was a blatant show of disloyalty towards the country that these people of colour have chosen to live in. It is in this context that Homi Bhabha’s postulation resonates, that “Cultural translation is not simply appropriation or adaptation; it is a process through which cultures are required to revise their own systems and values, by departing from their habitual or inbred rules of transformation” (Qtd. in Chaudhury “Translation or Carrying Over” 16). London, or more specifically Willesden becomes a curious site of this multicultural encounter, a fluid space, where Samad Iqbal can obstinately cling on to his Bangladeshi roots, his son Millat can simultaneously have white girlfriends and take an active part in the Bradford Book Burning Riots, Irie Jones, with an English father and a Jamaican mother can desperately want to get rid of the Afro Curls in her hair, and Archibald Jones and two Muslim brothers can have an Irish Cafe called Micky. This melting pot is the new world order, a result of people finding their identities multiple and fluid. Identities and the notion of belonging get recrafted with each new association, so that people who now belong to no straightjacketed box of identity, can actually claim to belong everywhere. Such acts of cultural translation throw off balance the idea that individuals could be labelled on the basis of their national identity and affiliation, their skin colour, their history of belonging and even the languages they choose to speak. For Bhabha it is these indeterminate spaces in-between subject-positions that are lauded as the locale of the disruption and displacement of hegemonic colonial narratives of cultural structures and practices (Bhabha *Location and Culture* 110). As Eduoard Glissant contends, "When identity is determined by a root, the emigrant is condemned (especially in the second generation) to being split and flattened. Usually an outcast in the place he has newly set anchor, he is forced into impossible attempts to reconcile his former and his present belonging." (Glissant 143).

The driving force for Smith is the rapidly shrinking nature of the world. Smith remarks, "This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow, and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune" (O' Grady "The Empire Strikes Back" 19). This is a world which sees people of different colours and nationalities jostle with each other, trying to carve out a niche for themselves, holding on to their native culture and at the same time trying to be cosmopolitan citizens of the world. This predicament is more pronounced for some more than others, and as a result, some of the characters in the novel know where they do not belong, and some know where they desperately want to and yet, both of these endeavours are characterised by an absence, "caught in a historical limbo between home and the world" (Pramod Nayar 132). When Smith was asked about the burden of roots and memory that the first generation immigrants bear with them, she remarked, "That whole kind of 60s, 70s, liberation ethic that you will be released by knowing your roots, that you will discover yourself, I just always thought was a crock basically, and its partly true, but your roots come with baggage. And the baggage isn't always fun." (O' Grady "*White Teeth*: A Conversation with Zadie Smith" 2).

In tune with the bustling and buzzing world around us, Smith's novel is a polyphony and cacophony of voices. There is a deliberate, almost Rushdiesque attempt to present the conundrums of identity and belonging in a light-hearted vein, with humour and irony being the dominant ingredients of story-telling. It almost becomes an aural-visual metaphor for the uninterrupted and unmediated flow of information and people over the internet and across the borders, a riot of colours and dialects. And yet, such a narrative has had its detractors as well. In a now famous review of *White Teeth,* James Wood coined the term *hysterical realism* to categorise a novel like Smith's and tore into it for what he considered was a flippant narrative mode. The problem with "hysterical realism", as he called it, was not only that it imitated the world around it too closely but that it also confused motion for vitality, narrative acrobatics for emotional complexity, catalogues of facts for the drama of knowing. "The conventions of realism are not being abolished", Wood argued, "but, on the contrary, exhausted". The hysterical novel failed not "at the level of verisimilitude, but…morality". It reproduced the chaos it hoped to resist, replacing meaningful self-discovery with the solitudes of self-consciousness. It knows, Wood concluded, "a thousand different things — How to make the best Indonesian fish curry! The sonics of the trombone! The drug market of Detroit! The history of strip cartoons! — but [not] a single human being" (2001).

The criticism is harsh, for in more ways than one, Smith's context determines her politics of presentation of the text. The characters in *White Teeth* that are given most attention are the failures of History i.e. the dominant modes of white imperial historiography, the debris thrown up by the intertwined contexts of colonialism, Nazism, World War II, and post-war migration to England from South Asia and the Caribbean. They include Archie, a nondescript white Englishman most unlike the revered (or in anti-colonial narratives vilified) British colonial subject, and Samad, whose delusional wartime ambitions are deflated by the end of the war and parodied in his eventual profession as a submissive waiter in an "Indian" restaurant. In the younger generation, Irie is of mixed race and national origin, white and black, Jamaican and English, predictably unable to fit into either group. In this regard, Rushdie remarks, "It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is a part of our common humanity" (12).

But it is this past, that some of the characters in the novel are fast holding onto. In England, the Bangladeshi Samad is afraid that the physical separation from the country of his birth may already have alienated him from his roots and he is unable to transplant his roots to the new territory. Samad "the traditionalist" (Smith 30) always finds fault with his spouse Alsana for getting rid of the traditional attire and values. Samad is continually trying to re-negotiate his place in British society while trying to force his twin sons, Magid and Millat, into strict Muslim identities. This is the irony of Samad's experience: he feels a constant need to belong, a need to believe in one experience, though he keeps straddling more. In Britain, he finds himself a victim of stereotyping and homogenisation, since he is constantly referred to as "not those kind of Indians" (Smith 54*),* even though he has a very distinct Bangladeshi Muslim identity. There is a sense of growth in Samad's otherwise very rigid character make up, for he realises that it is futile to try and want to belong in and as an accepted member of the British society. He begins to see that he tried all this while to fit in a system "where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated . . . it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere" (Smith 407).

Samad's extreme conservatism is the last resort available to him to protect and safeguard whatever little he can of his native identity in the face of the cultural onslaught that he feels he is subjected to in his life in Britain. His world is divided into two binaries, the "home" and the "world". In his interiorised space, he can claim to rule the roost over his wife, ordering her and tailoring her into the idea of a traditional and conservative Muslim woman, one he would have found in Bangladesh, but on the outside of his familial space, he does end up having an affair with one his son's teachers, a white English woman. He is Rushdie's translated man, only he is too blinkered to realise that this "not belonging" is an expected condition of immigrants and exiles and he refuses to make peace with it. Millat, Samad's son, does the opposite. He is bent on fashioning a particular idea of self in the public eye, taking part in the Book Burning affair in London against Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, but at the same time has a dragon's hoard of Pop Music vinyls and posters which Alsana, fed up of her son's duplicity, burns in rage.

Samad's desperate recourse to sending his other son Magid back to Bangladesh to find his "roots", while he himself stays on in London and pursues an inconsistent if not downright hypocritical path, boomerangs on him when Magid returns a (post)colonial mimic man (Supriya Nayar 8*).* In his decision to send only one of his twin sons back to Bangladesh for a more traditionalist upbringing, Samad Iqbal is "hoping to start over, to go home again through his son Magid, as it were. But of course, he cannot. Samad believes that he can live in the West but block its negative aspects. He seems to operate under delusion, as embodied by his ardent belief in the heroic acts of his ancestor which may never have occurred" (Nichols 3*).*

On the opposite end of the same spectrum is Irie, daughter of a Jamaican immigrant, who tries desperately to fit into the narrative of the conventional and accepted Western ideas of beauty and belonging. "Irie's self-mortification in the quest for beauty is not just an individual battle. As Smith editorializes, mid-novel, there are Iries everywhere striving for European straightness: no curves, no curls, please" (O' Grady "The Empire Strikes Back" 20). And the panic and chaos, according to Smith is not only the result of the immigrant influx but also might be looked upon as beginnings of a re-orientation and subversion of essentialised notions of identity. The world is a rapidly changing landscape, drifting with the envy of continents towards people having transnational and trans-cultural ideas of belonging and for this variegated London landscape, promises abundant beginnings for a new age that will never outgrow – nor escape – its many birthrights (O' Grady "The Empire Strikes Back" 20). Smith at the end of the novel, through her allegedly autobiographical character Irie, speaks out her vision. "In a vision, Irie has seen a time, a time not far from now, when roots won't matter anymore because they can't because they mustn't because they're too long and they're too tortuous and they're just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it" (Smith 254). But the problem remains, as "Irrespective of where they [first-generation Caribbean and Asian migrants] are born, even their children and grandchildren will never really belong", Paul Gilroy says, explaining that such an insistence on migration rather than settlement and nativisation not only dooms immigrants "in perpetuity to be outsiders", but also casts immigration in militaristic terms, as war against the original natives whose territory has been invaded (Gilroy 122).

Such "translated" men and women are forever in flux, never knowing where they belong and not knowing where they will end up. But such a ceaseless motion resists the more dangerous attempts at turning the entire world into a recognisable homogenised monolithic one. Harish Trivedi brilliantly sums up when he says, 'There is an urgent need to protect and preserve some little space in this postcolonial-postmodernist world, where newness constantly enters through cultural translations, for some old and old fashioned literary translation. For if such bilingual bicultural ground is eroded away, we shall sooner than later end up with a "wholly translated, monolingual, monocultural monolithic world." (Trivedi 7).

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