

"Multiculturalism in Crisis: Identity, Belonging, and Cultural Conflict in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* "

M.Mohamed Mazhar Hussain¹

Research scholar, PG & Research Department of English, The New College (Autonomous), Chennai-600014.

Dr.G. Shaik Abdul Wahab²

Associate Professor & Research Supervisor (Retd), PG & Research Department of English The New College (Autonomous), Chennai-600014.

Article Received: 10/04/2026

Article Accepted: 14/05/2026

Published Online: 16/05/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.05.104

Abstract

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* is a fascinating investigation of diversity in postwar Britain, depicting immigrant families' problems as they negotiate themes of identity, belonging, and cultural clash. This study critically examines the complexity of living in a multicultural society that often marginalises minority populations despite political rhetoric that supports diversity. Smith depicts generational conflicts, racial microaggressions, and identity issues faced by immigrants and their children in London through the interwoven lives of three families: the Iqbals, Joneses, and Bowdens. Because they are often reminded of their "otherness" by the prevailing British society, the protagonists struggle with emotions of alienation. The research emphasises how multiculturalism is often characterised by covert and overt forms of xenophobia, prejudice, and cultural repression, rather than peaceful coexistence. As shown in figures like Samad and his son Millat, it also examines the various reactions to these difficulties, ranging from docile acceptance to outspoken opposition. Additionally, from the perspective of marginalised populations, this article explores how history, memory, and genetics shape identity. Smith criticised scientific eugenics as a metaphor for the structural discrimination of the minority experience. In the end, this study contends that *White Teeth* portrays multiculturalism as a disputed environment in which identity is constantly negotiated rather than as a utopian ideal. The story concludes with a positive note, implying that respect for and understanding of one another may lead to a more inclusive and united society, even if it depicts a crisis.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Immigrant Identity, Cultural Conflict, Belonging, Generational Gap, Xenophobia, Hysterical Realism, Eugenics, Hybrid Identity

Introduction:

The groundbreaking novel *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith effectively conveyed the intricacies and paradoxes of multicultural Britain in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In postcolonial London, the book, published in 2000, captures the real-life realities of immigrant families negotiating questions of identity, belonging, and cultural clash. By weaving together the stories of three families—the Iqbals, the Joneses, and the Bowdens-Smith—vividly illustrate how immigration alters national and personal identities, often undermining the idealised diversity promoted by government figures (Smith 4). The book is a sociocultural reflection on the reality encountered by immigrants who contribute to Britain's multiculturalism but often feel "just tolerated" rather than truly embraced, in addition to being a literary enquiry (Kokate 717). Because the story revolves around this conflict between the rhetoric of inclusion and the reality of alienation, *White Teeth* is an essential novel for comprehending modern British identity.

Fundamentally, *White Teeth* challenges the idea of multiculturalism, which is often understood to be "cultural diversity coupled with equality of opportunity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance" (Jenkins qtd. in Kokate 718). This work raises doubts about whether this ideal has ever been achieved in reality. The experiences of the characters show a more complicated and sometimes exclusive reality despite Britain's pride in being a varied and open culture. Immigrants who feel torn between the two cultures, such as Samad Iqbal, a Muslim from Bangladesh, struggle to maintain their cultural background while adjusting to British customs. His psychological battle to balance his desire to respect his ancestry with his desire to blend into British culture reflects the difficulties faced by many immigrant groups. As Shamad regrets, "I have been corrupted by England... my children too" (Smith 115), highlighting the generational impact of cultural erosion and displacement.

The book revolves around the subject of identity, especially as it relates to first- and second-generation immigrants. Characters such as Millat and Magid Iqbal, who were born to immigrant parents in Britain, struggle with issues of selfhood and representation. Despite being native-born citizens, British culture continuously reminds them of their "otherness". For example, when Millat strives to blend into British youth culture, he is still labelled as a "Paki", confirming the notion that ethnic and cultural identity cannot be simply discarded or reinvented (Kokate 721). Similarly, Irie Jones, the multiracial daughter of a Jamaican mother and English father, wrestles with her physical appearance and cultural expectations. Her urge to straighten her Afro hair represents pressure to adhere to Eurocentric beauty standards, which complicates her sense of identity (Smith 302). These character arcs highlight the challenge of developing a consistent identity in a culture in which race, religion, and nationality connect in complicated ways.

The idea of belonging is closely related to identity and elusive for many characters throughout the book. Even after spending decades in Britain, immigrants often feel alienated and never fit. Systemic prejudices and microaggressions that perpetuate their position as "guests" rather than equal members of society aggravate this feeling of estrangement (Kokate 719). Shamad's query—"What am I going to do after this war is over... Go back to Bengal? Or Delhi... To England? Who would have such an Indian?" reflects the existential dilemma faced by many immigrants: the inability to return home and the simultaneous failure to feel at home in their adopted country (Smith, 78). The idea of England as a "Nothing space", where immigrants must always negotiate their presence without ever gaining complete acceptance, serves to further highlight this liminality (Kokate 720).

Xenophobia, which may take both overt and covert forms, is another important issue that *White Teeth* has examined. The tale shows how prejudice endures in daily encounters despite the existence of legislative prohibitions. When Magid rings the bell too often while riding the bus with Millat and Irie, a white passenger mutters, "This is a telling example." "If you ask me they should all go back to their own..." (Smith 216). Even though they may not seem as much, these comments add up to make the atmosphere unfriendly to minority groups. The Merriam-Webster definition of xenophobia is "fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or of anything that is strange or foreign" (qtd. in Kokate 719). This dread manifests itself in *White Teeth* via institutional neglect, prejudice, and exclusion, rather than violence. The protagonists' frequent experiences with such sentiments show how xenophobia functions as a structural factor influencing the immigrant experience, as well as an individual kind of prejudice.

Nelson Mandela once dreamed of a society in which "every man, woman, and child are treated equally... where all people of all races work together in harmony" (Kokate 717). *White Teeth*, however, highlight the discrepancy between this idealised vision and the actual experiences of immigrants in Britain. This tale demonstrates how deeply rooted biases and inequities continue to exist under the surface, despite political leaders' advocacy of diversity. This disparity is best shown by Shamad's annoyance in the absence of Muslim holidays in his children's education. He questions the prevalent inclusion narrative in Britain, posing the question, "Why must my children celebrate [the Harvest Festival]?" (Smith 267). His stress on cultural visibility draws attention to the conflict between the lived realities of minorities who feel excluded by the same system purported to accept them and official integration initiatives.

The interwoven lives of the Iqbal, Jones, and Bowden families provide a complex view of multicultural Britain in *White Teeth*. Each family embodies a different aspect of the immigrant experience: Bowdens represents the historical legacy of colonialism and migration; the Joneses, especially Clara and Irie, deal with issues of mixed-race identity; and the Iqbals struggle with religious and cultural preservation (Kokate 717–724). The ease of

identification of Archie Jones, a working-class Englishman married to Clara, stands in stark contrast to his immigrant colleagues. He does not struggle with issues of belonging as Shamad or Clara do, demonstrating how privilege and whiteness provide certain people with a feeling of rootedness that others do not (Smith 101). As shown by his unintentional release of the genetically altered mouse in the book's conclusion—a symbolic act of freedom that raises the prospect of escape from deterministic systems of control—even Archie is not completely immune to the chaos of modernity.

White Teeth serve as a celebration of diversity, as much as a condemnation of it. It highlights the shortcomings of a culture that embraces and tolerates diversity, but also gives hope that true understanding and connection are achievable. For example, Archie and Samad's relationship crosses ethnic lines and provides an example of solidarity based on humanity rather than similarity (Kokate, 719). With Irie returning to Jamaica to regain her origins and the mouse escaping the limitations of scientific manipulation, the story also concludes with a cautiously optimistic note, signifying the lasting possibility of freedom and self-determination (Smith 408). These incidents imply that despite the current crisis, multiculturalism is still rehabilitative.

White Teeth offers a compelling perspective for analysing the continuous difficulties associated with diversity in Britain. The story highlights the conflicts between political aspirations and social reality by providing definitions for important themes, such as multiculturalism, identity, belonging, and xenophobia, as well as by presenting the experiences of the Iqbal, Jones, and Bowden families. In addition to criticising the hypocrisy of a system that upholds exclusion while promising equality, it also celebrates the tenacity of people looking for a purpose and belonging in a world that is becoming increasingly divided. The path to real intercultural unity is not without its challenges, but it is worthwhile, as Smith reminds us.

Discussion:

The conflicts between the idealised concept of diversity and the actual experiences of immigrant families in postcolonial Britain are thoroughly explored in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. The story shows how this ideal regularly falls short of reality, despite political rhetoric that usually hails cultural variety as a pillar of contemporary British identity. The experiences of the protagonists show that multiculturalism is often characterised by systematic exclusion, microaggressions, and alienation rather than peaceful cohabitation (Rattansi 45). The hardships of the Iqbal, Jones, and Bowden families, which show the discrepancy between political promises and ordinary reality, best illustrate this contradiction. This contradiction is personified by Shamad Iqbal, a first-generation immigrant from Bangladesh who struggles to find a place in a society that both wants and rejects him completely. His psychological struggle between maintaining his cultural heritage and assimilating into British society reflects the general concerns of many immigrants who are torn between two different realities (Smith 115). Despite his wartime allegiance to England, Shamad is becoming increasingly

estranged, as he realises that his efforts do not result in true inclusion. He regrets, "I have been corrupted by England... my children too," expressing his concern that integration would inevitably lead to cultural deterioration (Smith 115).

Further highlighting the gap between political aspirations and actual experiences is the notion of integration, which Roy Jenkins first described as "cultural diversity coupled with equality of opportunity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance" (Jenkins qtd. in Rattansi 67). When considering the experiences of people like Shamad and Alsana Iqbal, who must negotiate a society that tolerates rather than embraces them, this categorisation seems implausible. For example, on a bus trip with Millat, Irie, and Magid, Magid inadvertently rings the bell too often, causing a white passenger to say, "If you ask me they should all go back to their own..." (Smith 216). Even though they may not seem as much, these comments add up over time and reinforce feelings of exclusion and otherness. These microaggressions demonstrate how xenophobia shapes the immigrant experience both structurally and individually (Merriam Webster). Instead of being overtly hostile, it may take the form of quiet, exclusion, or courteous indifference, all of which add to the atmosphere of estrangement.

As second-generation immigrants must navigate their position in a culture in which country, religion, and race all cross in unanticipated ways, the problem of identity becomes even more complicated. Born to immigrant parents in Britain, Millat and Magid Iqbal grapples with issues of representation and selfhood. They are influenced by London's mixed culture, yet their father, who adheres to ancestors' customs, is constantly reminded of their "otherness." Recurrent experiences with racism and marginalisation cause Millat, in particular, to become radicalised. Despite being a native-born citizen, he is called a "Paki" and seeks empowerment by joining KEVIN, a radical Islamist organisation that opposes Marcus Chalfen's Future Mouse Project (Smith 327). His rage is representative of a larger annoyance among young people of colour who feel marginalised and powerless in mainstream British culture. Magids, on the other hand, rejected religious and cultural traditions in favour of science and reason. Although this causes him to become estranged from his familial and cultural origins, his scientific detachment might be seen as a kind of assimilation (Levine 89). Their differing answers demonstrate how different generations handle resistance and identity-building.

The connection between Shamad and his sons demonstrates this generational divide. Millat and Magid manage their identities in quite different ways, but Shamad is still steadfastly committed to maintaining his Bengali and Muslim identity. Millat's reactionary rage and Shamad's stoic endurance stand in stark contrast, highlighting the psychological toll of being in a multicultural society that denies equal status to minorities. Since Magid returns even more firmly rooted in Western scientific philosophy, Shamad's choice to send him to Bangladesh in an attempt to inculcate traditional values backfires (Smith, 284). This

intergenerational conflict highlights the difficulty of transmitting cultural norms in a setting in which prevailing identification narratives often discredit minority viewpoints. Irie Jones, a multiracial daughter of an English father and a Jamaican mother, battles with social expectations and her physical appearance. The pressure to adhere to Eurocentric beauty standards is symbolised by her desire to straighten her Afro hair, which further muddies her sense of identity (Smith 302). Even in her own family, she is often reminded of her differences, much like Millat and Magid are.

Xenophobic sentiments are often manifested via institutional neglect and daily prejudice, rather than through acts of violence. In *White Teeth*, racism is often cloaked in civility, making direct confrontation difficult. Irie's racial identity is essentially erased when her instructor suggests that Shakespeare's Sonnet 127 alludes to a lady who is just "dark-skinned" rather than racially Black when she asks her to analyse the poem in her literature class (Smith 310). Such microaggressions cause severe injury, which is why Irie tries to blend by changing how she looks. Her choice to assimilate rather than embrace her origins is symbolised by her decision to artificially straighten naturally curly hair. However, as Jackie and Denise, two experienced black hairdressers, note, "curled African hair follicle will in the end, follow its genetic instructions", implying that eliminating one's individuality is ultimately pointless (Smith 312). This metaphor goes beyond hair to include a more general battle to preserve cultural identity in a culture that forces minorities to fit.

In *White Teeth*, identity and belonging are greatly influenced by history. The significance of ancestral memory in creating one's sense of self is demonstrated by Shamad's fixation on linking his ancestry to the 19th-century independence warrior Mangal Pandey. Although Archie Jones disputes these assertions using official documents, he clings to oral narratives that link him to a glorious past (Smith 198). Shamad's assertion that his family's tale is true highlights the conflict between historical and firsthand accounts. He emphasises the subjectivity of historical reality by telling Archie, "Just because the words exist, it does not follow that it is a correct representation of the character of Mangal Pandey" (Smith 199). Irie and other second-generation immigrants who want to rediscover their Jamaican origins find this interaction between individual and communal memories to be very pertinent. Her trip to Caribbean Island allows her to validate her identity and re-establish a connection with her maternal lineage, both literally and figuratively (Smith 408).

The novel's depiction of genetic experimentation and eugenics also challenges scientific objectivity. Marcus Chalfen's Future Mouse Project serves as a metaphor for the oppression of minority groups in the name of scientific advancement. Chalfen represents the arrogance of those who think they can build perfection by altering the mouse DNA to remove unpredictability (Levine 112). This experiment is similar to actual eugenics methods, which historically aimed to increase the human population by eliminating those who were considered inferior. Since Millat understands the danger of reducing existence to a set of

controllable factors, his opposition to the endeavour might be seen as resistance to structural tyranny (Smith 345). His participation in KEVIN was an act of defiance against a system that diminished the lives of minorities. Magid, on the other hand, is fully in favour of the idea because he believes it would help him comprehend and manage the world. The ideological divide between generations is further highlighted by the conflict between Shamad's scientific worldview and Shamad's religious convictions.

White Teeth offers a complex depiction of diversity as a place of strife as well as a place where change may be possible. Smith reveals the shortcomings of a culture that embraces diversity, yet tolerates it via the interwoven lives of the Iqbal, Jones, and Bowden families. However, the book closes with a cautiously hopeful message that a true understanding and connection are achievable. Irie's return to Jamaica represents a reclaiming of cultural identity, while the unintentional release of the genetically altered mouse at the end represents freedom from deterministic systems of control (Smith 408). These incidents imply that despite the current crisis, multiculturalism is still rehabilitative. The path to real intercultural unity is not without its challenges, but it is worthwhile, as Smith reminds us.

Conclusion:

Smith's White Teeth reveals the conflicts between political aspirations and actual reality through a deep and complex examination of diversity in postcolonial Britain. Smith shows how identity, belonging, and cultural conflict influence the immigrant experience through the interwoven lives of immigrant families, including the Iqbals, Joneses, and Bowdens. The characters often feel tolerated rather than fully welcomed, despite government narratives that support integration and equality, highlighting the precariousness of intercultural cohabitation (Rattansi 45). The novel critiques the myth of a harmonious melting pot by highlighting the systemic exclusion, microaggressions, and generational divides that persist beneath the surface of an ostensibly inclusive society. Characters such as Shamad Iqbal, who struggled with the fear of losing his heritage in a strange country, are prime examples of the fight for cultural preservation. In response to this problem, his sons, Millat and Magid, take different approaches: Magid assimilates and detaches himself from science, while Millat radicalises and resists it. Similarly, Irie Jones attempts to adhere to Eurocentric beauty standards by altering herself to face her multiracial status before regaining her Jamaican heritage (Smith 302). These stories highlight the difficulty of establishing a consistent identity in a culture in which country, religion, and ethnicity interact in intricate ways. Smith exposed scientific racism and eugenics as metaphors for systematic control over minority populations via symbolic aspects, such as the Future Mouse Project (Levine 112). White Teeth concludes with a positive note by implying that multiculturalism is not hopeless despite its current predicament. The unintentional escape of genetically altered mice represents freedom from deterministic systems, whereas Irie's return to Jamaica represents the reclamation of cultural identity. By doing this, Smith demonstrated the tenacity of people looking for purpose and belonging in a society that is becoming increasingly divided.

Works Cited:

- English, K. Dylan. "Eugenics." Oxford Bibliographies in African American Studies, June 2016.
- Levine, Philippa. *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Lowe, Jan. "No More Lonely Londoners." *Small Axe*, vol. 5, no. 1, Duke University Press, Mar. 2001.
- Rattansi, Ali. *Multiculturalism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- White Teeth. Penguin Books, 2001.
- Wood, James. "Human, All Too Inhuman: On the Formation of a New Genre: Hysterical Realism." *The New Republic*, 24 July 2000.