

# "More English than the English": Cultural Translation and Hybridity in Zadie Smith's White Teeth

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**University of Rijeka**  
**Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
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**“More English than the English”: CULTURAL TRANSLATION AND HYBRIDITY  
IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH***

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language  
and Literature and Philosophy at the University of Rijeka

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# CONTENTS

- 1. INTRODUCTION.....1
- 2. HOMI K. BHABHA ON THE IDEA OF HYBRIDITY.....2
  - 2.1. The 'third space' .....3
  - 2.2. Cultural Translation.....4
- 3. SMITH'S HYBRIDS.....8
  - 3.1.The Iqbals.....8
  - 3.2. The Joneses.....15
- 4. GENETIC HYBRIDITY.....18
  - 4. 1. Mythology and science.....18
  - 4. 2. The Chalfens.....18
  - 4.3. The FutureMouse.....19
- 5. CONCLUSION.....23
- REFERENCES.....24

# 1. INTRODUCTION

“This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow, and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment.” (Smith 2000: 326)

In the middle of the 20th Century, London became the epicentre of immigrant activity from all around the world. It was a time of anti-colonial uprisings which left Britain in need of workers to rebuild itself. This led to the passing of the 1948 British Nationality Act, which gave all Commonwealth citizens free entry. However, while Great Britain did not seek to assimilate these immigrants- to make them conform to a fixed notion of ‘Britishness’- it did not fully accept them either. This attitude engendered a rather unique example of cultural hybridity, particularly in the cities.

In her 2000 debut novel *White Teeth*, the then 24-year-old Zadie Smith depicted the life experiences of a set of immigrants and natives in England at the turn of the century and their struggles to coexist.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha examines the influences of colonialism on the political and cultural structure of a person's identity and how this identity is articulated in the new, post-colonial phenomenon of multiculturalism. He focuses on the idea of hybridisation, a merging of a plurality of cultures, religions and races, of the personal and the global spheres of an individual life, and the creation of an entirely new mode of existing in the world. Bhabha quotes Guillermo Gomez Pena's belief that, “this new society is characterized by mass migrations and bizarre interracial relations. As a result new hybrid and transitional identities are emerging.” (Bhabha 1994: 313)

In this thesis, I will provide an overview of Bhabha's ideas regarding hybridity and explore how they shed light on the lives of Zadie Smith's characters as cultural, ethnical and religious hybrids.

## 2. HOMI K. BHABHA ON THE IDEA OF HYBRIDITY

Bhabha's notion of a hybrid identity finds clear echoes in Smith's *White Teeth* which depicts different sorts of hybridity and shows how they emerge as a consequence of different historical and political events. A hybrid is a mixture of multiple differing entities (whether it be living beings, cultures, races or other), and is an impure form of each of its components. For Bhabha, "hybridity is how newness enters the world" (Bhabha 1994: 303), and he sees it as a gateway for change, with change being the most crucial aspect of human existence. Likewise, Smith views hybridity as a term for progress and development throughout her novel, and, in common with Bhabha, sees this form of cultural morphing as more desirable than unambiguous identities.

Bhabha also acknowledges the potential struggles of being a cultural hybrid, of the difficult negotiation between all the diverse sides of oneself. It involves, he writes, "something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps impossible, dimensions." (Bhabha 1994: 311-312) Zadie Smith's character Samad Iqbal's career in England articulates these difficulties, as he constantly strives to keep some sort balance between his roots and British culture. Of his struggles, he says, "(...) it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere." (Smith 2000: 407)

## 2. 1. The 'Third Space'

Another idea that Bhabha addresses is Jameson's idea of a 'third space'; it is the 'in-between space' where those who have a "borderline existence" (Bhabha 1994: 312) find themselves between their past, their origins, language, culture and country, and their present, which is culturally, spatially and temporally different. Smith gestures towards the overwhelming presence of the past by citing the line "What's past is prologue" from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as an epigraph for her novel, which features people who struggle to come to terms with their histories and heritages, and are unable to focus on the present reality of their conditions. Samad Iqbal, for instance, makes no decision without consulting with memories of the time he fought in the Second World War with his friend Archie Jones, the stories of Mangel Pande's heroism, or traditional values. Hence, Samad's wife Alsana notes that he and Archie have, "One leg in the present, one in the past. No talking will change this. Their roots will always be tangled." (Smith 2000: 80)

After growing up around Samad's and her father's stories of the glory days in the war, Archie's daughter Irie gets frustrated with their constant reminiscing. She wants to talk about the present, be a part of the culture and community she inhabits, and not live in a permanent retrospect that promotes unrealistic ideas about the present and a blindness to the future. So when she meets Marcus Chalfen, a man of science and progress, living in the present with an eye on the future, she is mesmerised instantly:

So there existed fathers who dealt in the present, who didn't drag ancient history around like a ball and chain. So there were men who

were not neck-deep and sinking in the quagmire of the past. (Smith 2000: 326)

Smith's characters seem to have a leg on each side, but not be able to stand still in that position. Instead, they get pulled in one direction then another and live in a constant imbalance. As the novel's narrator says, "this is the other thing about immigrants (...) they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your own shadow." (Smith 2000: 466)

This uneven merging of past and present takes physical shape in the novel with O'Connell's Pool House, which is "neither Irish nor a pool house." (Smith 2000: 183) It is a shell of a traditional pub, with walls full of "reproductions of George Stubbs's racehorse paintings, (...) an Irish flag" (Smith 2000: 183), Eastern scripts and a map of the Arab Emirates, and is under Arab Muslim ownership. Behind the bar is Abdul-Mickey, so called because all his siblings were named Abdul and, to render them appropriate according to British naming standards, they all added English names to their first ones- an instance of accepting a hybrid identity. O'Connell's, of course, serves traditional English food: chips, beans, mushrooms, tomatoes, eggs, but not, under any circumstances, bacon. It is a perfect example of immigrants creating a 'third space' where the lines and edges are still unclear, but the presence of different cultures is acknowledged.

## **2. 2. Cultural Translation**

I will conclude this section by looking at Bhabha's idea of cultural translation. Cultural translation is the state of an immigrant identity that has been 'translated' from the original culture to new one: it is, as Harish Trivedi put it, "a process and condition

of human migrancy." (Trivedi 2005) Employing such an idea helps to analyse the difficult processes of cultural morphing.

Just as the processes and history of translation register the power relations between different languages, the cultural translations that Smith's immigrant characters undergo speaks of the power of the dominant culture. For instance, Samad's son Magid Iqbal introduces himself to his chess club friends as Mark Smith, seemingly simply acting like a young boy embarrassed of his unusual name. However, the narrator makes it clear that there is "a far deeper malaise" (Smith 2000: 151) in Magid's act. He was 'translating' his name in an attempt to translate his entire identity from one of a Muslim boy to one of an Englishman.

"Magid really wanted to be in some other family. He wanted to own cats and not cockroaches, he wanted his mother to make the music of the cello, not the sound of the sewing machine, (...) he wanted his father to be a doctor, not a one-handed waiter." (Smith 2000: 151)

All Magid wanted was to not be Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal, not to be a second generation immigrant, but someone else, someone who belongs in the world he was born into. He preferred being an 'anonymous' English boy than a Bengali with a glorious name. This shows the power relations of the cultures Magid is a part of, suggesting that the exchange in cultural translation is never equal.

Magid's attempts to translate his identity enrage Samad, who shows a complete resistance to the process of cultural translation. Just a text translation can never convey precisely the same idea as the original, but a modified, alternative version of it, and so undermines the supposed 'originality' of the original and unveils



'lacks' in the target language, cultural translation, as Bhabha notes, exposes the myth of cultural purity- a concept that Samad cherishes.

“I GIVE YOU A GLORIOUS NAME LIKE MAGID MAHFOOZ MURSHED MUBTASIM IQBAL!” Samad had yelled after Magid when he returned home that evening and whipped up the stairs like a bullet to hide in his room. “AND YOU WANT TO BE CALLED MARK SMITH!” (Smith 2000: 151)

In contrast, Samad’s white English friend Archie has no such concerns, or even thoughts about his name and what it signifies, other than the fact that he’s “a Jones, you see. 'Slike a 'Smith.” (Smith 2000: 99) Ironically, Zadie Smith uses her own last name as a metaphor for being ordinary, a ‘nobody’, someone with a colourless identity, which is perhaps portrayed as both something enviable (for Magid) and as an undesirable trait.

On several occasions, Samad gives into Western temptation and yet he seems to cling onto the sense of purity, in his religion and in his culture, perhaps because he realizes the lack of purity in himself and it instils fear. He fears becoming a hybrid; all he wishes is to remain Samad Miah Iqbal, descendant of the “unrecognized hero” (Smith 2000: 250) Mangal Pande, a pure Muslim man. Samad prides himself on not succumbing to the British identity and remaining a ‘pure’ Bengali.

In his obsession, which Alsana refers to as “The Third World War (...) in his head” (Smith 2000: 235), he constantly scrutinizes her for not behaving like a Bengali, but instead places her faith in rationality, the “most overrated Western

virtue," (Smith 2000: 235) according to Samad. Alsana, with her spiteful behaviour towards her husband, looks up Bengali in an encyclopaedia:

The vast majority of Bangladesh's inhabitants are Bengalis, who are largely descended from Indo-Aryans who began to migrate into the country from the west thousands of years ago and who mixed within Bengal with indigenous groups of various racial stocks. (Smith 2000: 236)

Alsana is a realist, aware of their situation as immigrants and constantly present parts of a completely different culture than the one they were born into. Purity is an illusion in their world and, if one looks closely enough, it is an illusion in everyone's world:

It looks like I am Western after all! (...) It just goes to show, you 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! (Smith 2000: 236)

However, even the rational, "unflappable" (Smith 2000: 327) Alsana had her concerns about keeping her 'pure' Bengali roots alive. The narrator reveals that Alsana would often experience nightmares about her BB son, Millat, "where B stands for Bengali-ness" (Smith 2000: 327) marrying a girl named Sarah, an aa "where 'a' stands for Aryan" (Smith 2000: 327), and have Ba children that would marry aa people and, in time, make Alsana's Bengali roots completely unrecognizable.

Similarly, Clara expresses concern for her daughter, as all she could see around her was "an ocean of pink skins" (Smith 2000: 328) and she feared that her daughter would disappear among them. Clara's concerns are, of course, ironic, since she herself married a white English man, causing her half black, half white mother to

stop speaking to her. As Hortense said, she “hadn’t put all that effort into marrying black, into dragging her genes back from the brink, just so her daughter could bring yet more high-coloured children into the world.” (Smith 2000: 327) Aiming for purity and clarity seems unrealistic for hybrids. Smith’s characters constantly seem to aspire to ‘monolingualism’, and that aspiration clashes with the making of who they are as migrants. To put it in Bhabha’s terms, their fate is to be in an everlasting state of translation.

### **3. SMITH’S HYBRIDS**

#### **3.1. The Iqbals**

The phenomenon of a hybrid identity sparked different reactions in the natives of countries slowly becoming second homes to great numbers of immigrants, ranging from acceptance to seeing the immigrants as invaders and as takers of jobs. In her novel, Smith placed the character of Samad Miah Iqbal, a Bengali Muslim, in the metropolis that is London, in British culture, in an arranged marriage with a younger Bengali woman named Alsana, and the company of his friend from the days of the Second World War, Archie Jones, who is of “good honest English stock.” (Smith 2000: 99)

Samad and Archie’s “unlikely friendship” (Tew 2010: 45) shows the accepting attitude of a part of the British population towards the immigration process. I use the term ‘unlikely’ as the two share little to nothing apart from their war days; Samad being an opinionated, short-tempered, religious man of colour, demanding recognition for great achievements he never made and Archie being the content, humble, indecisive, white, English character, his religion being the flip of a coin.

Samad Iqbal is constantly tortured by his family’s history and his inability to

find a compromise between his roots and his new life in London due to his weak-willed nature (something he would never admit to having). During his time immersed in this new culture he found temptation in it, the 'Britishness' dragging him away from the nature of his beliefs and turning him into a different version of himself. Samad makes a lot of excuses for his deviations from the Muslim religion, from the war to the sight of Poppy Jones, his sons' music teacher. These, as he sees them, external factors drive him to drink, drug abuse, masturbation, eating pork, and being unfaithful, things he justified by blaming the corruptive nature of British culture.

He and Alsana had two twin boys, Magid and Millat. Despite having a hybrid family, Samad demanded purity, of himself and of his wife and children. Of course, as the novel shows, Samad's idea of purity is a myth. However, straying away from it had a strong effect on his conscience, and although he did attempt to clear it by starving himself, he soon throws up his hands and decides to pass the responsibility on to one of his sons.

Claiming his intention is purely to protect him from the corruption of life in London, he sends the 2 minutes older Magid to Bangladesh, thus separating the twins and inspiring great resentment from Alsana. He dreams up the perfect version of the person Magid is going to turn into:

Two sons. One invisible and perfect, frozen at the pleasant age of nine, static in a picture frame (...) untouchable and unstained, elevated to the status of ever-smiling Buddha, imbued with serene Eastern contemplation; capable of anything, a natural leader, a natural Muslim, a natural chief—in short, nothing but an apparition. (...) This son Samad could not see. And Samad had long learned to worship what he could not see. (Smith 2000: 216-217)

Samad seems to be one to hold on to unrealistic expectations. The image of Magid as he wants him to be is a comfort he holds on to, assurance that he is still keeping the Iqbal name worthy of the actions of heroes as Mangal Pande is to him.

Magid's life in Bangladesh was to atone for all the Iqbal sins committed on English soil. Before Samad made this choice for his son, Magid was a well-adapted English boy with Bangladeshi roots. He was an intellectual, loved by his teachers and even though he was a source of pride for his father, he wished to sever the connection with his heritage, which was, as previously mentioned, for Magid most prominent in his name.

As Samad witnesses his son denying his name and becoming unrecognizable, it enrages him. It means that his son is choosing to be an Englishman, something Samad considers to be inherently corrupted and that represents all that he did not want to become. Rebelling against his father's insistence on rejecting hybridity and identifying himself as a Bengali Muslim, Magid instead accepts his British identity and becomes "more English than the English" (Smith 2000: 365). Considered in terms of cultural translation, Magid employs a strategy Lawrence Venuti calls 'the domesticating mode of translation.' What this strategy does is "it takes what is foreign home and appropriates it for itself." (O'Malley 2011: 11) Essentially, it "seeks to remove any traces of foreignness" (O'Malley 2011: 11), something Magid seems to do quite well. We see this upon Magid's return to London, as Samad takes him to O'Connell's where his "Queen's (...) English" (Smith 2000: 449) and his insistence on a bacon sandwich stand in great contrast to the usual clientele. He had found a way to resolve his own struggles of being a cultural hybrid and rejected his father's. Throughout the novel, Magid seems at peace with his fixed English identity, while Samad seems to keep battling to resist any form of translation.

Millat was always two minutes behind Magid. It started at birth and in Samad's eyes stayed so throughout their lives. He was not as good in school and even though he excelled socially, his knack for getting into trouble always had him take the role of the lesser brother. After being separated from his brother, Millat's mischievous behaviour increases. To the reader, it can seem like a consequence of some form of separation anxiety, as if Millat was rebelling against being apart from his twin. As we bear witness to Millat's problematic teenage years, it becomes evident that he is a representation of the struggle involved in the process of cultural translation. He constantly has to negotiate his hybrid identity:

He had to please all of the people all of the time. To the Cockney wide-boys in the white jeans and the coloured shirts he was the joker, the risk-taker, respected lady-killer. To the black kids he was fellow weed-smoker and valued customer. To the Asian kids, hero and spokesman. Social chameleon. And underneath it all, there remained an ever-present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere. (Smith 2000: 269)

While Millat was accepted to some degree on all fronts, he could not accept any of them as completely his own. There was always something missing, always a part of him that did not fit in completely. The feelings of anger and angst were the dominant influences on Millat's behaviour. This is the hybrid struggle, the anger and hurt about the fact that both cultures are a part of him, but that no part would ever be big or good enough. In Venuti's terms, what Millat is trying to articulate is a 'foreignising mode of translation' which "strives to register the otherness of the foreign in its translation practice." (O'Malley 2001: 11) It is a form of translation that highlights and acknowledges the distinctiveness throughout its process. The

consequences that come with an accentuated diversity lead Millat to believe that he would always be limited by his dual cultural identity and remain foreign. Even though he chooses to, it is hard to find a way to accept this.

He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelled of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a filmmaker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshiped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. (Smith 2000: 233-234)

Millat was acutely aware of how he might be perceived due to his descent. To Bengalis, he is too English, and to the English, he would always be a Paki, an outsider in the process of invading. The latter seems to cause more aggravation in all the children, the second-generation immigrants, showing power relations in cultural translation. Magid and Irie desperately want to translate themselves to be British, as they believe in the notion of 'Britishness' and its superiority.

The novel hints at a strange and strong link between the twins on a few occasions after Magid's departure, e.g. when Magid gets a broken nose in a storm in Bangladesh and sends a picture back home, Millat slips and breaks his nose by hitting the sink. This connection that Smith throws into the story is somewhat puzzling as Magid and Millat's relationship never really gets re-established once Magid returns to England. In expectation of a warm reunion and coming together of two long lost twins, what we get is polar opposites. By making this a part of her story, Zadie Smith

tries to depict two sides of one coin, each trying to erase one identity and fully embrace the other.

As Magid is thrown into Muslim culture in his first years in Bangladesh, spending time in mosques and growing a beard, Millat lives the life of a rebellious British teenager. As years go on and Magid's secularity and intellectual tendencies become evident, Millat finds himself as a member of KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation), a radical fundamentalist Muslim group. The ironic conversion is addressed briefly by Millat, who admits his interest in KEVIN grew out of his love for clans ("and the outfit and the bow tie." (Smith 2000: 442)) Millat recalls a conversation with a psychiatrist and the reader is given confirmation that his problematic nature is indeed, at least partially, a consequence of his separation from Magid:

Marjorie the analyst had suggested that this desire to be part of a clan was a result of being, effectively, half a twin (...) that his religious conversion was more likely born out of a need for sameness within a group than out of any intellectually formulated belief in the existence of an all-powerful creator. (Smith 2000: 442)

Of course, Millat brushes it off, he is not one to over analyse or even acknowledge his own behaviour. "Maybe. Whatever." (Smith 2000: 442) It seems as if once their separation was made, the crossing of their paths was never possible again.

This polar opposition of the Iqbal twins hints at various things within the novel. One grand aspect is irony, as Samad's expectations not only fail to come true but drive both of his sons to rebel against him in their respective ways. The second aspect is that they are symbols of hybridity in second-generation immigrants,



depicting “an ambivalent attitude toward the two cultures they are caught up in” (Graaf 2012: 15), seemingly belonging to two countries and cultures, but struggling to call either home, as Millat does, or finding your dominant culture to be different than your family’s, as Magid does.

Samad's idea of redemption in the form of some of his blood living the life he betrayed backfired when Magid chose a life of intellectualism rather than spirituality and returned 'more English than the English.' The son he kept by his side turned from a problematic English boy to a radical Muslim young man on the account of desperately craving a true sense of belonging, making Samad equally disappointed in both of them.

Alsana Iqbal seems to be standing on solid ground. Despite being thrown into an unfamiliar culture due to her arranged marriage to Samad, Alsana seems to be a character that has found a certain degree of balance in her cultural hybridity. Despite being well adapted to her life in London and Samad's constant accusations of her succumbing to Western culture, she is a Muslim woman wearing a sari and carrying around sweets from back home and criticising the ridiculous aspects British culture, with remarks such as “I come from the land of tea to this godawful country and then can’t afford a proper cup of it,” (Smith 2000: 440) and “The English are the only people (...) who want to teach you and steal from you at the same time.” (Smith 2000: 356) While she evidently loves her homeland, she is aware of the advantages for her and her family of living in England. Her life in Bangladesh, a part of the world always in the shadow of imminent danger, taught her to have a realistic outlook on life:

To Alsana’s mind the real difference between people was not colour.

Nor did it lie in gender, faith (...) The real difference was far more

fundamental. It was in the earth. It was in the sky. You could divide the whole of humanity into two distinct camps, as far as she was concerned, simply by asking them to complete a very simple questionnaire:

(a) Are the skies you sleep under likely to open up for weeks on end?

(b) Is the ground you walk on likely to tremble and split? (...)

(Smith 2000: 210)

Alsana's camps were people who would answer no and those who would answer yes. Those who live "on solid ground, underneath safe skies" (Smith 2000: 211) and those who live "under the invisible finger of random disaster" (Smith 2000: 211), as they do in her native country. It is safety for her children that she is after more than anything, and for that she has found a life for herself in a culture in which she will never truly feel she fully belongs.

### **3.4. The Joneses**

The routes chosen by Samad's two sons thus make the second generation of Iqbal family culturally strongly diverse. As Smith's novel progresses, Millat and Magid contribute to its ethnic diversity as well, through their connection to Irie, Archie and Clara's daughter.

Irie is a young girl born into a mixed family, her father being a white Englishman and her mother a black Jamaican woman from a family of Jehovah's witnesses. She is dark-skinned, has black, curly hair and a broader body frame characteristic of her mother's roots. Because of this contrast in her British culture and racially ambiguous appearance, she was constantly met with questions like:

"Pale, sir! Freckles an' every ting. You Mexican?"

"No."

"Arab?"

"Half Jamaican. Half English."

"Half-caste," Jackie explained patiently. "Your mum white?"

"Dad."

Jackie wrinkled her nose. "Usually de udder way roun." (Smith 2000: 273)

Such instances and the feeling that no element of her life seems to match any other lead Irie to misplace her hope for a solution in such things as changing her appearance to adhere to white standards of beauty.

Irie's state presumably comes from her family, having a father who never struggled with who he is culture or ethnicity wise, being a white male and being a Jones: "We're nobody... My father used to say: 'We're the chaff, boy, we're the chaff.' Not that I've ever been much bothered, mind. Proud all the same, you know." (Smith 2000: 99) Despite his best friend being Bengali, his wife Clara and daughter Irie being black British-Jamaicans, he never saw the issues that come along with it, as if he was colour-blind in a society that clearly saw and judged the colour of his loved ones' skin. His colour-blindness and ignorance are a result of his lack of hybridity. Archie seems to be a man without roots, without anything but being almost classically English to his name. This lack of history and heritage and colour makes Archie almost disabled when it comes to dealing with the reality of his own family. However, it is also what makes his relationships with family and friends possible. Clara's and Archie's marriage is not a result of great, passionate love. It is a result of affection, but also of convenience, of settling, and of not wanting to be alone. Clara

desperately wants to get away from the oppression of her home and her religion and she sacrifices a chance at a loving and romantic marriage to do it. When she first appears in the novel she is a dynamic character, but as the novel progresses she gets swallowed up by 'Englishness' and the 'whiteness', suppressing all that was intriguing and colourful about her. All Clara craves is peace and a future with some distance from her past.

Having Archie and Clara as parents brought a lot of confusion and anxiety to Irie. She longed for purity in the form of white skin, straight, light coloured hair, and a perfect middle-classness, something she found in the form of the Chalfen family:

It wasn't that she intended to mate with the Chalfens... but the instinct was the same.(...) She just wanted to, well, kind of, merge with them. She wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfenishness. The purity of it. It didn't occur to her that the Chalfens were, after a fashion, immigrants too, (...) or that they might be as needy of her as she was of them. To Irie, the Chalfens were more English than the English. (Smith 2000: 328)

She thought of them as the ideal of what she needed for herself and did not care if it was not real. This desperate need she felt during her childhood led her down strange paths and straight to a slightly ironic ending. On the same day, she sleeps with both Magid and Millat, and her quest for English purity ends in a daughter that is a mix of white, black and Bengali, and a powerful sense of connection to her Jamaican roots that leads her finally to live a life in the Caribbean.

## **4. GENETIC HYBRIDITY**

### **4.1. Mythology and history**

Genetic hybridity has been present in various ways in the world for centuries. Starting from Greek mythology where the most powerful and majestic of beings were the likes of centaurs (part human, part horse) and griffins (part lion, part eagle), to Hindu culture where one of the Hindu Gods, Ganesh, is part human, part elephant, such creatures were symbols of might, but also of duality.

Centaurs, for example, are often portrayed as creatures of great knowledge and wisdom, often taking the role of tutors or guides in times of need. However, some other portrayals show them as dangerous and wild creatures, who, despite their human side, are unable to live amongst humans and unable to be tamed.

Historically, the term stems from the Latin *hybrida*, meaning the "offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar." ("Hybridity," 2008) The origin of the word itself signals to a hybrid being a mixture of two unmixable creatures, which makes its 19<sup>th</sup> Century use as an expression for a "child of a slave and a freeman" ("Hybridity," 2008) a depiction of the racial segregation present at the time.

### **4.2. The Chalfens**

The "more English than the English" (Smith 2000: 365) Chalfen family plays a seemingly subtle role in the novel. In the sea of multicultural families, the Chalfens are a white, Jewish family of intellectuals that becomes vastly present in the lives of Archie's and Samad's children. However, the scientist parents, Joyce and Marcus, give a fresh perspective on hybridity in the novel, one that shows how our world experienced genetic hybridity.

Joyce is a horticulturist which right away reveals that her perspective contributes to the subject, as the term hybridity emerges from the field of biology. Her husband Marcus is an author and scientist who we encounter just as his newest project in the field of genetic engineering is in progress.

The great myth of the Chalfen family is their 'purity' and their 'Englishness'. In the eyes of the children of the novel, they represent the perfect, white, middle-class, successful, intellectual family that reflects the image of fitting into, and being a part of, British society. As it has already been established, the novel eventually debunks all myths of the pure and the truly English, with the narrator exposing them as actually being immigrants: "third generation, by way of Germany and Poland, né Chalfenovskiy." (Smith 2000:328) The Chalfens seem to have simply, through generations, time, financial success, and social status, accomplished a 'domesticating' translation.

The family seems to be so successful in their adapting that it seems fabricated, their seemingly 'perfect' status only compromised when their son Joshua joins an animal rights group and rebels against his father's work with genetic engineering. Even though the novel's narration refers to the Chalfens' idyllic image with irony from the beginning, it is Joshua's rebellion that provides the characters with a more realistic insight into the family.

### **4.3. The FutureMouse©**

Marcus Chalfen's importance within the novel lies in his creation of the FutureMouse©, a genetically modified mouse whose DNA is carefully constructed and controlled by him to avoid any unexpected occurrences such as diseases. Marcus's aim is to free the world of the random, of the possibility of mistakes in

genetic material and to assume complete control over the human lifespan.

Strongly supportive of her husband's endeavours with the FutureMouse©, Joyce is an advocate for crossings between species within her field of expertise. Cross-pollination and cross-breeding have been the efforts of scientists for decades and have produced new species that have since been reproducing and becoming normative. In her book, *The New Flower Power*, she writes:

The fact is, cross-pollination produces more varied offspring that are better able to cope with a changed environment. It is said cross-pollinating plants also tend to produce more and better-quality seeds.

(Smith 2000: 309)

Joyce's belief in the advantages and superiority of hybrids is shown even in her fascination with Irie, Magid and, in particular, Millat, who is at the same time the most and the least adapted one. As persons with dual identities, they captivate her, making her set her own children aside in order to observe the embodiments of what she calls "gardens of diversity and interest." (Smith 2000: 310) As his work progresses, Marcus decides to present his work to the public, stating the following in the press release:

The FutureMouse© holds out the tantalizing promise of a new phase in human history where we are not victims of the random but instead directors and arbitrators of our own fate. (Smith 2000: 433)

With this particular sentence, it can be predicted how the strongly religious characters might react to the creation of the FutureMouse©. Being a director of faith is a role most often ascribed to a higher power, a God-like entity, all-powerful and all-knowing;

with his project, Marcus Chalfen gets accused of playing God, a serious offense according to the novel's religious groups.

Before I get to the fairly obvious religious protests against the creation of such a creature, I will refer to a scene in the novel where Marcus encounters a young girl reading his book on genetic manipulation. Attempting to get confirmation of his genius, he gets instead someone who finds his work frightening and with fascist tendencies:

“There’s just something a little fascist about the whole deal... (...) where are we going here? Millions of blonds with blue eyes? (...) I mean, if you’re Indian like you’ve got something to worry about, yeah?” (Smith 2000: 418)

Defending Chalfen against this accusation becomes difficult when the press release reveals that by its fourth year, the mouse will be genetically determined to turn from brown to white. The fact that the novel observes the experiment from different and extremely critical perspectives and in the end gives the mouse his freedom, at least from its cage, might imply its criticism of this attempt to determine identity by removing its randomness and making it predictable.

As previously mentioned, Marcus' project attracts the attention of multiple religious groups; the radical Muslim group KEVIN is enraged by the experiment, as their focus is on purity in all its forms that pertain to the Muslim religion in its most fundamentalist shape. They strongly object all impure activity, including Millat dating non-Muslim women, and claim that Chalfen's work is part of a disease called Kurf, “refusing to acknowledge the infinite blessings of the Creator.” (Smith 2000: 467)



Clara's mother, Hortense, and her group of Jehovah's Witness go so far as to call Marcus Chalfen the devil and Irie the devil's secretary. They decide to use the event in which Marcus will present the FutureMouse© to the public as a chance to spread the word of the end of the world and invite people who support the devil's work to seek salvation and become part of the 144,000 that will be accepted into the kingdom of heaven. Their stance on the FutureMouse© experiment reflects their stance on hybridity itself, as Samad, members of KEVIN, Alsana and Clara's mother all stand against or at least experience anxiety about racial and cultural mixing.

Apart from the religious, the FutureMouse© becomes the target of FATE (Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation). As the scientific experiment Marcus is conducting has an innocent mouse as a subject, the animal lover group, which includes Marcus' son Joshua, prepare for a protest against the event. This group presents the perspective that forcefully determining identity is an act of conceited men, and that fate is not a matter of men at all.

In the end, the mouse escapes from the box he was destined to spend his entire existence in, showing us perhaps that one should not play God, or that identity is, in fact, uncontrollable, and that there is a possibility of overcoming the determined aspects of ourselves, such as our DNA. The mouse's creation and what it results in cast a reminder to Samad and Magid's situation. Just as the mouse's life was meaning to be determined by his genes, Magid's father hoped that his would be determined by his surroundings. The fact that both overcame their determinism shows the novel's stance on identity, how it is composed of far more than roots, DNA, culture, surroundings and upbringing.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Zadie Smith's novel is an extensive exploration of the life, trials, and psyche of cultural, ethnical, religious and genetic hybrids. Through stories of accepting, rejecting, 'domesticating', and 'foreignising' ones hybrid identity, Smith has provided people with a deeper understanding of the hybrid struggle as well as challenged the notions of purity, Britishness, and social and cultural norms.

However, though her message of celebrating and embracing diversity is clear and admirable, Smith's hybrids can on occasion seem engineered and exaggerated. Her occasional use of fabulist elements makes the characters seem as mere representations of the points being made through them, as opposed to 'real' people with sincere reactions, which makes them slightly unlikeable.

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