



Strangers in Strange Lands: The Immigrants and Ideology in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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Abstract

In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith portrays the multicultural and multiethnic Britain from the 1970s to the 1990s through the lives of three families. Contrary to most criticism which celebrates the hybridity of immigrants in *White Teeth*, this paper challenges the hybridity of the immigrants' identity and studies the ideologies in the novel. This paper first examines the unhomeliness of the immigrants and then analyzes how British ideological state apparatuses successfully assimilate some of the immigrants while failing to assimilate the others and the role that school and families play in the assimilation process.

Key words: *White Teeth*; Immigrates; Unhomeliness; Ideological state apparatuses

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INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of *White Teeth*, when the protagonist, Alfred Archibald Jones decides to commit suicide on the first day of 1975, he chooses Cricklewood Broadway. Cricklewood Broadway is a place which squeezes between an almighty concrete cinema complex at one

end and a giant intersection at the other. It is not a suitable place for committing suicide but a place where Archie Jones lives, together with many other immigrants. Cricklewood Broadway represents the multicultural and multiethnic Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith portrays the lives of three families from the 1970s to the 1990s, the family of Archie Jones, a white male with a black wife, the family of Samad Iqbal, a Bangladesh immigrant family, and the family of Chalfens, a Catholic Jewish mixture. For its vivid portray of immigrants, *White Teeth* is considered as the desired multicultural novel of a new multiracial England, a celebration of London as an international city in which the people and cultures of the world are cross-pollinating. (King, 2007, p.290) The cultural identity, assimilation, estrangement, the generation gap and other topics covered by *White Teeth* make it was interpreted mainly from the postcolonial point of view. Most critics and general readers tend to read *White Teeth* for the hybridity of immigrants, multiculturalism and racial problems. Fernández argues that the ethnically diverse characters portrayed in *White Teeth* relate to each other in an often funny, sometimes shocking and naïve way and Smith's intention is to present a multicultural Britain where ethnic differences are deemed insignificant. (Fernández, 2009, p.153) McMann argues that the novel "ask the reader to consider carefully the claim of multiculturalism." (McMann, 2012, p.632) Consistent with McMann's argument, this essay challenges the idea of hybridity in immigrants' identity and studies the ideologies in the novel. This essay explores how the life experience of immigrants makes hybridity impossible and how British ideological state apparatuses successfully assimilates some of the immigrants while failing to assimilate the others and the role that British education and family plays in the assimilation process.

1. NARRATING THE UNHOMELINESS OF THE IMMIGRANTS

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* tries to record and reconstruct the lives of immigrants in the second half of the twentieth century when Britain was considered as a multiethnic and multicultural society. Samad and Alsana Iqbal are immigrants from Bangladeshi, and they live a hard life in Britain. In order to move into a better house, they had "a year of mercilessly hard graft" to earn money. The hand-crippled Samad in his 40s works from six in the evening until three in the morning, yet what he got is rather modest, even a decent tip was rare for him. But in the restaurant, Samad is not the only one who lives in misery, his colleague, eighty years old Muhammed still has to work, and Shiva, the only Hindu on the staff who does quite an excellent job in waiting tables is angry about his low salary and the unfair system of distributing tips equally with Samad and Muhammed. Shiva is an ambitious young man, he tries to start his own business in 1979 and he leaves the restaurant for a short period of time to start up a security firm, but "nobody wanted to hire Paki bouncers" so he had to come back, a little less aggressive, a little more despairing, like a broken horse. (Smith, 2000, p.142) For them, there is no hope and no future but only resentment. Samad spends most of his night like this: "abuse from Shiva and others; condescension from Ardasher; never seeing Alsana; never seeing the sun."(Smith, 2000, p.58) The desperate Samad wants to wear a sign, a large white placard which shows his identity. The interesting thing of the sign is that Samad denies his identity as a waiter (in fact he is a waiter) and claims that he is a student, scientist, soldier, Muslim and above all his British identity, which means he is a Muslim who lives in London, he is a Bangladeshi immigrant who has social relation with white man (Archie) and he is still an attractive man of masculinity. The denial of his true identity and the identity he envisions makes him in dilemma. As an immigrant, he is caught between his past and present, his Muslim heritage and British culture, and his fantasy and the reality. Strictly speaking, Samad is a British citizen and Britain is his home, yet he feels unhomey. Homi Bhabha defines "unhomey" as a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition, "the unhomey moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James's *Isabel Archer*, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'" (Bhabha, 1994, p.13) Bhabha's point is that unhomeiness does not mean that people are homeless, instead it means an emotional condition a feeling of being caught between different cultures, but belonging to neither of them. The definition is mostly connotative in representing the identity crisis of immigrants.

Like all the immigrants, Samad is caught between two different cultures. On the one hand, he wants to keep

his Muslim heritage and continues the glory he thought his family once had. Samad thinks his great-grandfather Mangal Pande was the hero who shot the first hateful bullet in the war against British colonization, but no one even himself can prove it. Samad contributes it as the "petty English academics trying to discredit him, because they cannot bear to give an Indian his due."(Smith, 2000, p.99) Later, according to an "inferior, insignificant, forgotten piece of scholarship" found in the library of Cambridge College, Samad reads a page which says Mangal Pande is a hero, yet still nobody believes him, even his acquaintances in the O'Connell's have doubts about the credibility of his story. While in the dilemma of being obsessed with Poppy and being afraid of the Judgment Day, Samad got the conclusion that "I have been corrupted by England, I see that now my children, my wife, they too have been corrupted. I think maybe I have made the wrong friends. Maybe I have been frivolous. Maybe I have thought intellect more important than faith."(Smith, 2000, p.105) Being afraid of his two kids will grow up in a society which has "no sense of tradition, no fucking morality", Samad sends one of his twin boys back to Bangladesh to learn their Muslim culture.

On the other hand, Samad behaves more like an English rather than a Muslim. When he becomes parent-governor in the school which his two sons attend, he participates in the school governors' meeting actively, though all the motions he put forwards are ignored by the other members of the meeting. At the meeting, he met Poppy Burt-Jones, the red-headed music teacher. After being obsessed with Poppy for some time, they fall in love with each other. Samad is crazy about her so he recommenced masturbation in earnest even though he knows it very well that it is against his religion. He is a Muslim, yet he does a lot of things which are against the doctrine of Islamism as he tells "I want another woman. I've killed my son. I eat bacon. I regularly slap the salami. I drink Guinness. My best friend is a kaflfir non-believer." (Smith, 2000, p.149) Strictly speaking, Samad is not a real Muslim. Yet he needs an identity, as the British identity represented by Poppy is not available, he has to cling to something and Muslim is the only choice for him. His attitude towards Poppy represents his unhomeiness, he is neither a Muslim nor a British as he said in the novel, "I am having difficulties myself, we are all having difficulties in this country, this country which is new to us and old to us all at the same time. We are divided people." (Smith, 2000, p.179)

When talking about cross-cultural translation, Homi Bhabha proposed the concept of hybridity. In Bhabha's definition, hybridity is a cross between two separate races or cultures while it is "neither the one nor the other", it is something new and it contests the terms and territories of both. (Bhabha, 1994, p.37) In post-colonial studies, people tend to view hybridity as the identity of immigrants and

assume that immigrants construct a new identity in the new environment. Even some critics argue that *White Teeth* “resist the discourse of successful multiculturalism and ethnic diversity and respond with a more complex narrative that pits ambiguities and accommodation with mixed identities against technology.” (Sicher, Weinhouse, 2013, p.98) But examining *White Teeth*, there is no hybridity, no new identity, there is either Muslim identity, or British identity, and there is no in-between. Samad represents the first generation of immigrants after World War II, in him, we see nothing hybrid, but his obsession with his Muslim root. As for the second generation represented by Millat and Irie, they either completely stick to their original identity or abandon their old identity.

The next generation of Samad and Archie grow up in the multicultural and multiethnic Britain, yet they are still not recognized as English people. At the age of nine, Magid changed his name into a more English one, Mark Smith. At the bus station, the ticket-man called Mallat “paki”; at Chalfens’s home, Irie, Millat were asked where they came from originally after they said they came from Willesden, London. At last, Millat realized that “he was a Paki no matter where he came from; had no sexual identity;--- that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans”, in all, “he had no face in this country, no voice in the country.”(Smith, 2000, p.234) He cannot find his place in society, when he was persuaded to join the Kevin for his handsome looking to attract more members, Millat agreed. Magid and Irie choose the opposite road with Millat. Magid grows up in Bangladesh, but when he returns to Britain, he is more English than the English. In Chalfens’s home, Irie saw a new world and was deeply attracted by the middle-class life. Irie’s mimicry proves Lacan’s idea that “mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled.”(Bhabha, 1994, p.121) Mimicry is the false representation of the reality and it will never make the colonized becomes the same as the colonizer. Just like Irie’s mimicry of straightening her hair results her losing of all her hair due to the harsh chemicals. At last, she has to buy an Indian woman’s hair to cover her almost bald head.

In the novel, we saw no mixture of identity but only one identity. The paradox and irony of them is that Magid grows up in Bangladesh, and he becomes obsessed with English life, while Millat lives in Britain, he turns out to be an Islamic extremist. Behind all this is the British ideology state apparatuses.

2. IDEOLOGY STATE APPARATUSES IN ASSIMILATION

Louis Althusser argues that in order to sustain the reproduction of the conditions of production, there are two kinds of States Apparatuses at function, the Repressive States Apparatuses (RSAs) and the Ideological States Apparatuses (ISAs). The RSAs contains the government, the administration, the army, the policy, the court, the prison and so on. The ISAs contains churches, parties, trade unions, families, schools, newspapers, cultural ventures and so on. In *White Teeth*, ISAs function mainly through schools and families, just as Althusser argues “schools and churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection to ‘discipline’ not only their shepherds, but also their flocks.”(Althusser, 2001, p.1490)

Different with the first generation immigrants, the second generation are easier to be assimilated into the mainstream culture. The British ideology successfully make school the best place for the ISAs at work. It is at school where Magid get in touch with other students and feel ashamed of his Muslim name, so he changed his name into Mark Smith and addressed his mother as “Mum” instead of “Amma” as he used to do. Name-changing is just “one symptom of a far deeper malaise”, the worse thing is Magid has accepted an ideology which is too much for his age, the middle class. “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;--- and this month Magid had converted all these desires into a wish to join in with the Harvest Festival like Mark Smith would.”(Smith, 2000, p.151) School becomes a battlefield of different religious ISAs. In the parent-governor meeting of the school, Samad put forward twelve motions and all of them were denied including the school not to celebrate the Harvest Festival by the other members of the committee. The school will celebrate Harvest Festival like it celebrate Christmas for it is a tradition and all the students have to join in or they will get a detention. Here the Christian tradition becomes the tradition for all the students, even for the Muslim students like Magid and Irie. When being caught for smoking weed in school, the headmaster of Glenard Oak suggested a two-month programme for Millat and Irie to go to Joshua’s house and join him in a two-hour after-school study group. The headmaster thinks this will make them get away from their own family environment and personal hassles which may damage their potential for a better future. People do not regard this kind of arrangement as punishment, but very constructive for “it is very much in the history, the spirit, the whole ethos of Glenard Oak.” But the history of Glenard Oak is a history of colonization. The founder of the school, Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, is a successful colonial who built the school to make the Jamaican Christians more devoted to their work. The history and spirit of Glenard Oak is in fact a history and spirit of colonization. In history, Britain colonized Jamaica through

its plantation in Jamaica, but in the second half of the twentieth century, Britain continued to colonize through its ideology state apparatuses.

Millat and Irie get into the lives of Dr. Marcus Chalfen, which is another world for them. The Chalfen family stands for the typical middle class and Irie is deeply attracted by them. For Irie, "She'd never been so close to this strange and beautiful thing, the middle class, and experienced the kind of embarrassment that is actually intrigue, fascination." (Smith, 2000, p.321) In Doctor Chalfen, Irie saw a father who dealt in the present, who didn't drag ancient history around like a chain and ball. The behavior of Doctor Chalfen is the opposite of her own father, as Doctor Chalfen looks into the future with his research on the Futuremouse, while his father clings to the past. Under the influence of Chalfen, Irie abandons her old beliefs and becomes a robust atheist. Irie is not the only one who was converted by the Chalfen family, or by the British middle class ideology. The middle-class is a symbol and it stands for the British ideology of class, family and so on. For Joyce, the middle class were "inheritors of the enlightenment, the creators of the welfare state, the intellectual elite and the source of all culture", even she doesn't know from where they got the idea, she still "felt no shame about using the term 'middle class'". (Smith, 2000, p.435) Through school and family, British ideology functions well in assimilating Magid even though he lives far away from Britain, in a third-world country. According to the "great tradition of English education", Marcus and Magid became pen pals which in the end leads Marcus's founding of Magid to study law in Britain because Marcus's FutureMouse needs a staunch defender and Magid is the very one. Magid comes back to Britain, only as a man who is more English than the English. Chalfenism reinforced Magid's conviction to British culture and values. He does not want to meet his twin brother for their different religious beliefs, he helps Marcus heart and soul. The school and family apparatus plays a dominant role in the assimilation process of Irie and Magid, just as Althusser argues: "the Church has been replaced today in its role as the dominant Ideological State Apparatus by the school. It is coupled with the Family just as the Church was once coupled with the Family." (Althusser, 2001, p.1495)

What makes the function of British ISAs in doubt is Millat. Millat lives in London and becomes "The Trouble with Millat", he joins the so called KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation) and becomes an extremist. Millat lives in almost the same environment with Irie, under the influence of the same ISAs, then questions arise: what makes the difference between Millat and Irie, and what is wrong with the British ISAs?

Althusser points out that ideology is a "representation" of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. (Althusser, 2001, p.1500) The ideology functions when the individual behaves

in a certain way, adopts a certain practical attitude, and participates in certain regular practices. The way, attitude and practices of the individual are the result of the ideological apparatus. Inspired by the ideology, every "subject" believes that he is in consciousness and is free to choose, then he will "act according to his ideas" and inscribe his own ideas as a free subject in the actions of his material practice. (Althusser, 2001, p.1501) In ideology, subject is the most important factor. In order to make the subjects accept their status as subject, the ideology hails individuals as always-already subjects. Althusser noticed that there are four conditions of the mirror-structure of ideology: the interpellation of "individuals" as subjects; their subjection to the Subject; the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other, and finally the subject's recognition of himself; the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right. (Althusser, 2001, p.1507)

Under the British ideology, everyone in society is a subject. In order to assimilate the immigrants, the British ideology has to hail the immigrants as subject and make them realize their status as subject, and most important of all, realize that if they behave according to the English ideology everything will be all right. Althusser also notes that there are "good" and "bad" subjects. Subjects may adhere to or resist ideology, good subjects adhere to the dictates of dominant ideology through the recognition, acceptance, and maintenance of its practices. Bad subjects rebel against dominant discourse, often by adopting alternative or oppositional ideologies. (Gray, 2004, p.56)

In *White Teeth*, the subjects (immigrants) are denied the status as subjects, so they rebel against dominant discourse and adopt alternative or oppositional ideologies. Shiva failed in starting his own business because of his Indian background; Mo, the owner of Hussein-Ishmael butcher shop, joins KEVIN later. He has been a victim of serious physical attacks and robbery several times every year, the police would not protect him. For him, "this simple fact had done more to politicize Mo over the years than all the party broadcasts, rallies and petitions the world could offer." (Smith, 2000, p.473) Millat wants to be a subject of the British society, however, due to his race he was rejected, too. For him, his father is not a real Muslim but a hypocrite; no matter how hard he tries, he will always be mistaken as "paki" and will never be a true member of the British society. Millat's family's ideological apparatus failed to make him a true Muslim, and the society denied his status as a subject of the British ISAs. Under all these circumstances, he becomes an Islamic extremist so he can be part of a clan to find his identity.

The split of the twin brothers, the fight between Joshua's mother and Alsana and the protest and fight in the exhibition of Futuremouse are in fact the fight of different ideologies. Alsana accuses Joyce of "taking her

son away, Englishifying him completely and deliberately leading him away from his culture and his family and his religion," Alsana's accusation is not only to protect her family, but also to protect her culture and identity. While the Futuremouse stands for the ideology of British middle class and the mainstream culture, it means moving forward without looking back. Millat and KEVIN members cannot fully integrate into the British society because of discrimination and the fact that they always live in the past, and therefore they turn to extremists. Just like Millat's middle name Zulfikar (which means the dashing of two swords) indicates Millat was neither one thing nor the other, this or that, Muslim or Christian, Englishman or Bengali; he lived for the in between. (Smith, 2000, p.351) His identity is the dashing of two cultures. As the British educational and family ISAs fails to make him a good subject, Millat adopts oppositional ideologies by joining KEVIN and becomes a fundamentalist.

CONCLUSION

Britain has been a multiethnic and multicultural society since the 1970s, but not a real one. The immigrants from the third world countries in Britain are not equally treated in any area. They are weak in their economic and political powers; they have no equal rights in the society. Under the powerful ideology, mainly through education and families, Britain successfully makes some immigrants accept its ideology and abandon their original culture completely. Yet at the same time, the discrimination makes some immigrants feel "unhomely", they belong to nowhere, they have to cling to their history for help and

spiritual power. In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith portrays the lives of immigrants, reconstructs the ideologies which both assimilates and turns away the immigrants as well as points out that the immigrants' clinging to history is sometimes the obstacle to their future.

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