The Crisis of Identity in a Multicultural Society

A Multicultural Reading of Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*

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Abstract

This essay, on Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, deals with the characters’ identities and the influences of multiculturalism on their complex identities. It also discusses the role of the characters roots and history in constructing their identities and how they have made life problematic for the characters in multicultural London. The roots and history of the first generation of immigrants make problematic identities for the second generation in the novel. The main aim of this essay is to demonstrate the instability of identity as depicted in the novel. The characters in the novel cannot ‘’plan’’ their identities because it is a process which continues in all stages of life. Though the first generation of immigrants want to ‘’plan’’ an identity for their children (the second generation of immigrants), they are not successful. Because identity is a process and it is changeable based on place and time. The second generation of immigrants, who live in London, tries to mix the dominant culture (English culture) with their familial culture in order to have a different identity. They also want to escape from their family’s roots and history but it is difficult, because leaving roots is not an easy process.

**Keywords:** multiculturalism, Zadie Smith, identity, roots, history, culture, ethnicity, religion.
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1. Introduction and Background

Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* portrays London as a mixture of different cultures, ethnic groups, and religious beliefs. In Smith’s novel, London is described as a multicultural city in the 20th century, this as a result of British colonialism. To some extent any society can be defined as a multicultural place, as long as it is constructed by two or more different cultures, religions, or languages, this can be recognized in *White Teeth*. Smith combines two families, the Iqbals (the immigrants) and the Joneses, who have different national identities but also different worldviews, cultural and religious values. Though, the characters (in this case, the immigrants) live in London and have been assimilated and integrated, still some of them try to hold themselves to their rituals, religious beliefs, and cultural values, in order to protect their roots and identity from external influences. However, this seems to be problematic for some of the migrated characters at least for the first generation, where English people’s culture and values have great influences on the second generation. Furthermore, the first generation is aware of their background, and makes many attempts to protect their roots and identity by practicing different religious and traditional rituals but also through teaching the second generation the importance of their roots. Despite their efforts to keep their cultural identity, they are not successful and they also faced the problems of complex identity, that is to say, they face the difficulty of identifying themselves with a stable and clear identity because identity is unstable and changeable. This phenomena occurs often in multicultural societies but also in families where the parents have different nationalities and cultural backgrounds.

In addition, Smith points out the importance of identity in multicultural societies and immigrants’ inability to escape from their history that is determined by influences of
their predecessors. The change of time and space between the two generations is a central aspect in *White Teeth*. The first generation’s ambiguous past makes things problematic for their children (the second generation). Seda Arikan argues that Smith focuses on the conflict between the first and the second generation of immigrants as well as the third generation (1682). Smith presents this problem in two dimensions; they are cultural history and personal history which is reflected by both the first and the second generations (1683). This takes back the issue to the discussion of space and time; history is something that the second generation escapes from. It is here that not only the complexity of identity occurs but also the conflict between generations.

After WWII, a large number of people from different places around the world immigrated to Britain; most of them from former British colonies such as the Caribbean and India. According to Caryl Phillips, the reason why people made their way to the UK was because of their familiarity with the British language, religion and culture from the time of colonialism (110). The immigrants had left their countries for different reasons, for example; educational and political ones. But, most of them escaped from the poverty in their countries, and they saw Britain as a suitable destination to start over and begin safer and happier lives. Related to the novel, Samad Iqbal is represented as an immigrant from Bangladesh and the Iqbals do not want to return back to their country because of economic and political issues. When Alsana (Samad’s wife) hears the news of Indira Gandhi’s murder on radio, she starts crying and stated “I am not crying for her, you idiot, I am crying for my friends. There would be blood on the streets back home because of this, India and Bangladesh; there will be riots- knives, guns. Public death, I have seen it”
(Smith 195). As one notices, one reason that the immigrants do not plan returning back to their homelands is because of their traumatic experiences back home.

Another central aspect in *White Teeth* is racism. Smith illustrates the issues of racism and class barriers through the Chalfens and Iqbals. The Chalfens’ family is educated, rich, intelligent, and have a high position in the British society. Unlike them, the Iqbals, belong to the minority groups in London, that’s to say the two families’ jobs, places of living and their educational level show the class differences between them. Racism exists mostly around the areas where the immigrants live and work. The three families that Smith presents live in North London Willesden. Willesden is one of the most diverse areas in Britain, shaped by a large number of immigrants.

Due to the immigrants’ cultural and ethnic differences, the immigrants feel threatened. Their desire to maintain their roots and cultural identities is something that Smith pays much attention to (this will be discussed more thoroughly in later sections). Moreover, these racial tensions lead to a complex issue and dilemma, the struggle of protecting and saving identity from both sides. This process of prioritizing identity as number one issue in one’s life can be seen though Samad’s behavior and actions towards his son Magid. Samad sends Magid back to his homeland in order to grow up in the Bengali way and to make Magid familiar with his family’s background through culture and Islam, so that he would become “a real Bengali, a proper Muslim” (Smith 215).

The need and demand for representation is something that is prominent in the novel, among both the minorities and the British. The minorities sought to be represented and have equal rights, freedom of choice and to practice their cultural and religious rituals and traditions without being discriminated against (Brah 25-28). For example this
occurs when Samad asks a school teacher to include Islamic ceremonies to the school’s calendar (Smith 129). Samad thinks of this inclusion as the immigrants' right, and in this way the children would become more familiar with their religion and culture.

This essay will explore the role of roots and history in the characters’ identities. The central question is how does multiculturalism effect and shape the characters’ identity, and how do history and roots play their role in constructing characters’ identity in a multicultural society? Zadie Smith focuses on the complexity of identity in White Teeth, her characters’ identities are different based on their place of birth such as Jamaica, India, and England, including people of Jewish heritage. Also, the characters all live in North London together; this choice of blending individuals together is also a way for Smith to illustrate the cultural and religious differences between characters. Each of her characters represents a particular identity with his/her own particular background; Smith explains this diversity through her novel by the first and second generations of immigrants. Identity, as it is portrayed in White Teeth, is a complex and central issue for individuals, due to the influence of time and space. Zadie Smith is biracial and she is the daughter of an English father and a Jamaican mother. We can say that Smith herself is a representation of the construction of a new British citizen with a new kind of identity.

In White Teeth, history and roots are the main themes and the novel is clearly dealing with the characters’ past and history. Although the characters are living in Britain, some of them are still locked in the past in their minds and this links them to their place of birth and their country. Immigrants retain their links with kinship, religion, culture and territory with their homeland (Rex 207). The characters’ culture, language, religion and place of birth and the place that they came from are considered to construct their past and
roots. Roots are an important issue in the construction of the characters’ identity, for that reason I have focused on roots to identify how it has affected the characters when it comes to their identities. In *White Teeth*, Smith uses teeth as a metaphor to represent the rootedness of the characters. Roots are necessary for individuals because it can be the determiner of their identity; human’s teeth are the unique part of body which are difficult to take out, this means that they are hard to escape from. Therefore it is not easy to leave or do away with roots just like that, even if one tries to leave it, it will not be an unproblematic process because it is painful to do away with just like teeth, and the vacuum it leaves behind is not easy to fill because roots and history is a part of self-identification. For example, in the novel Zadie Smith’s characters have different views on their background, for example, Irie (a dark-skinned girl who has a Jamaican mother, Clara Jones, and an English father, Archie Jones) wants to escape from her history and family’s past, and she is glad that her daughter would not know her father so that she will not deal with the problem of roots. Clara is a character who wants to escape from her roots. And Samad believes that roots are necessary, and tries not to lose them.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the issue of identity is complicated due to the process of globalization and the creation of a global homogenous society. David Buckingham describes identity as an ‘ambiguous’ term that can be used for many different purposes (1). Everyone has their own specific identity that differs from others, such as Samad’s sons, Millat and Magid. Although identity is something complex and not a thing one can choose, Millat and Magid have the same prerequisites and cultural background, but each of them has its
own identity. Buckingham argues that identity lets people know themselves, who they are and who others are. At the same time, it lets others understand their operating environment differently (1). Jenkins (5) argues that identity is a process; one cannot consider it as a ‘thing’ that individuals can possess or can do. As support for Jenkins’s argument, Charles Correa, argues that identity is a process and it is not a ‘found’ object. This process can be produced through history and a period of time. We can find our identity by understanding ourselves (who we are) and our environment (10). Avtar Brah states that identity is an “enigma” because the individual’s everyday experience shows that identity is changeable and it is not the same in every situation (20). These scholars argue that identity is a process and not a possession. It means that this process continues through the past “history”, the present and to a certain extent the future, and time is something that humans cannot control, which means that identity is shaped based on what one experiences through life and not something that one constructs by herself.

Identity is one of the most discussed concepts in recent years and it is a complex issue. According to Fearon, our understanding of ‘what identity is’ is based on how we define ourselves and how we answer the question ‘who are you?’ (12). However, this question may have many answers depending on the individual’s situation, and it has a continual shift according to place and time. Personal identity is not something clear and something one cannot say that ‘this is my identity’; rather people are identified with multiple identities when they belong to several groups or live in different places, this can be found for example in people who lives in Diaspora. An example of this kind of person is Magid, at the same time he is an ethnic Bengali, and he behaves as an Englishman. Therefore, identities are multiple and people’s histories and societal influences play their
role in the development of identity. In addition, these identities can develop and change during different stages in life, especially the age between childhood and adulthood.

The postcolonial theorist, Stuart Hall, in his article, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” argues that identity is a problematic issue and not as transparent as one thinks it is. He goes on by claiming that one should think of identity as a production that is constituted in representation. This production is not completed and it continues as a process in every human’s life (222). Even death cannot stop the process of identity. Sometimes people can get identification after death such as martyrdom (Jenkins 7).

Hall defines “cultural identity” in two different ways: in the first position “cultural identity” is defined as one shared culture that is hidden inside “selves”. It emphasizes the similarities that make “oneness” of “people” (223). The relationships between racial and ethnic groups that share the same history and heritage are created by migration, slavery, religious, and historical forces (Martin and Thomas 142). Related to White Teeth, the minorities of London share a cultural identity and religious identity, such as Muslim immigrants when they practice their religion wherever they are; in this case the immigrants have a shared identity based on a religious worldview. This kind of religious and cultural identity can thus be seen as a reflection of shared historical experiences and cultural codes.

Cultural groups or immigrants, who have left their homelands, will probably bring some customs and cultural practices to the new country. Immigrants have symbols and practices as the markers of their origin, especially first and adjacent generations pay more attention to their symbols and practices which they link to their ancestors and roots. Mostly, diasporic migration is one of the causes that make individuals show their identity
by symbols and practices (Martin and Thomas 142). The cultural identity has played a big role in post-colonial struggles. This sort of identity is more about storytelling and “re-telling” of the past by individual’s ancestries -- the narratives of the past (Hall 224). 

Apart from that, cultural identity has another position which is, in some ways, related to the first position. According to Hall, the second position emphasizes the similarities and differences within a cultural group, for example, the black Caribbean identity. The differences explain ‘what we really are’ or ‘what we have become’. We cannot form an identity for so long with ‘one experience and one identity’ (Hall 225). Because identity is a production, not a “thing” that everyone could have or do, it also is an “open-ended” process (Jenkins 9). Hall elaborates his discussion on, the second position of cultural identity and defines it as “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being” (225). It is understood as unstable and changeable. Identities are not something that already “exist” but rather they come from a place that has history. This means that it is not a fixed essence but a positioning and we give the categories of identity to the ways that we are positioned by the narratives of the past. This identity that is produced in the past is not eternal, but it goes under the influence of place, time, history and culture (225-226).

Similarities and differences between identities make cultural identity more complicated. Hall illustrates this by taking the black Caribbean identity as an example, which has two directions; similarity that gives some continuity with the past, and difference that shows what they share is the experience of discontinuity. Cohen Robin says that, Hall argues that slavery and the mixture of other migrants construct new identities such as hybridity, diverse and difference. For Hall diaspora is:
“not defined by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are hose which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall qtd in Cohen 125).

Additionally, Erik H. Erikson gives an explanation on identity crisis in his “Autobiographic Notes on the Identity Crisis”. Erikson emphasis is on the period of adolescence, which he believes is the critical stage for an individual’s identity development. He asserts that identity crises occur in one’s developmental period (732). He also states that identity starts from past and extend toward the future. This means identity “is grounded in the stages of childhood and will depend for its preservation and renewal on each subsequent stage of life” (733). Although the period of identity development makes identity crises happen in the modern world, globalization is another factor that contributes to identity crises (Jenkins 33). Due to global changes and population increases, one could say that many individuals have complexities with their identity. Globalization can here be perceived as the factor that has made a difference among many ethnic groups’ identities in recent years. As long as cultural homogenization is commonly linked to globalization, some think that the world is becoming more similar through the process of globalization. “With homogenization, one sees the world becoming more alike in dress, language, economic structures and communication” (Burton 7). Culture and identity are about to fade away as a result of globalization, which
also leads to a decline of cultural features and ethnic identities like minority languages, style of life, dress, and cultural performance. William C. Watson argues that this is the process of cultural loss (71). Local cultures are threatened by cultural homogenization and globalization, so that people’s fear of losing their identification emerges. The process of cultural loss has led to more and more people seeking their way to their past and cultural roots. This new global era has become a battleground where both minorities and majorities are trying to defend their cultural and social identities. Globalization is also a factor in the increase of migration and the expansion of human connections; it has made the world smaller which in turn has made people adapt different identities and hybrid identities based on the circumstances.

While identity can be defined as the existence of belonging, Richard Jenkins raises another significant point. One might agree with Jenkins when he defines identity as a production that shows the past and present but is incapable of revealing the future; that is to say, it tells where people come from and where they belong but it cannot tell them where they should go in the future (6). Because identity is in progress and is open-ended and unpredictable, it also depends on individual decisions. In the novel, Magid is identified by his national and religious identity as Bengali and Muslim, but his interests are the opposite; he behaves like an Englishman by wearing suits, having white friends, eating bacon and so on.

The importance of identity is in its change, renewal and continual transformation of a person’s identity. Jenkins states that without having an identity there would be no human beings; therefore, identity does matter (28-29). Jenkins insists on the importance of identity and he says that identification involves individuals, collectivity and history (1-6).
It is a concept that can be applied for every human and creature based on the two criteria, similarity and difference (18). Identity requires both of them, similarity and difference, and it does not make sense without either of them. Jenkins believes that when someone says who I am, that person also needs to say who or what I am not, so that he/she can differentiate her/himself from others. It means that one cannot separate similarity and difference when one defines somebody (Jenkins 22). For example, when we identify ourselves it is important to mention with whom we do have shared links and interests with, such as kin-ship membership, religion and ethnicity because these are signifiers of the group similarity (23). Despite the importance of identity, it has a negative side, which is raised by Erikson. The negative aspect of identity is individuals’ need to carry their undesirable definitive labels that make them feel different, especially minorities’ different identifications (Erikson 733).

Identification in which humans know who is who and what is what is uncertain and each possesses unlimited characteristics. Though this leads us to think of identity as indeterminate, we focus on the limited characteristics of the criteria of difference and similarity. There is also a limited agreement between the individuals such as culture and shared knowledge (Jenkins 151). Jenkins argues that communal identity is considered to be similarity which is an important issue in the sense of culture and collectivity. He supports his argument by referring to the work of Anthony Cohen, writing that in a heterogeneous society in which diversity is everywhere life would be complex and unimaginable without a shared culture that can influence the individuals’ behavior (151). The individuals’ behavior is something that could be distinctive and could be even something in opposition to one’s identity. In other words, identity cannot determine one’s
behavior. Although the term identity, according to each theorist, has been defined differently, they share almost the same idea that identity is a process that continues in all stages of an individual’s life.

3. Previous Research

*White Teeth* is a work about multiculturalism and scholars have focused on the novel’s various themes such as culture, the problem of roots, religion, race, history, and identity. Identity is the most discussed issue that is linked to characters’ roots, religion and culture. In addition, *White Teeth* a metaphor shows the equality of humans, and that their place of birth, their skin color and their religion are not essential to their social status and class position, because after all, they have the same white teeth. Michele Braun focuses on teeth as a metaphor to represent the rootedness of characters (223). Smith uses teeth to present the relation between genetics and cultural heritage. The human teeth are the hardest and most enduring part of the body. Though teeth are a unique part of the human body they cannot regenerate and they are the last part of body to decay. Moreover, Braun shows the links between teeth and roots. Sometimes the tooth’s root can die or disappear along with different ages, but it does not affect its function. At the same time roots are bound to the jawbone which makes pulling the tooth difficult. These features can make teeth a great metaphor for the identity of migrants (224).

Additionally, Katerina Sajbtova in her research about “Identity in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth,*” focuses on religious identity. She provides information about the identity of Muslim immigrants who live in London (1). She focuses on Asian immigrants, and shows that the dominant culture has a great influence on minorities’ identity especially
their religious identity and “the change in religious identity is particularly obvious in the attitude of Muslims to Islam, which has changed from pure Islam to a more radical” (2). Although Samad has planned for his sons to be proper Muslims they come up with an opposite direction. Millat becomes radical, a member of the fundamentalist group KEVIN. Millat ironically decides to give up some of his behaviors that are not allowed in Islam but he still had relationship with girls despite it is forbidden. In fact Britain, after the mass-migration, “was forced to deal with a new religious issue. Muslim activists wanted Britain to recognize their religion publicly and that led to various policies attempting to accommodate the religious needs of immigrants in Britain” (Sajbtova21).

Moreover, minorities in Britain do not have only a singular identification, because the second generation of immigrants can be identified as British, Pakistani and Muslim, therefore ethnic minorities have a complex identity (Sajbtova24). Immigrants in London, especially the younger generations, live in two different worlds, different cultures, and practice different religions. At the same time it is possible to claim that the second generations of immigrants do not have one clear culture or identity because they learn and practice British culture at schools and other public institutions. Sajbtova argues that other cultures can change individuals’ identities because in Britain “people do not have unitary or singular identifications, and many second –generation individuals identify with being ‘British’ as well as being ‘Pakistani’ or ‘Muslim” (24).

Furthermore, racism is another important point that is raised by Sajbtova. White Teeth shows how English people have thought about immigrants such as Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (Sajbtova 16). Although Millat was born in London, he is not regarded as British. The creation of stereotypes make Britons see Pakistanis as thieves and connect
them with the lower classes. They also see the immigrants’ culture, clothes and religion as inferior, and therefore Millat thought that he would never be a successful person in British society. As a result of discrimination, Samad prefers to live in North London rather than in East London. Due to the large number of immigrants in North London his family has a more comfortable life.

Similarly, other researchers have discussed the issue of race. Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* portrays the role of race as a significant aspect in the 20th century. Mindi McMann states that Smith “marks the beginning of the complex web of multiculturalism, race and Britishness” (624). A large number of immigrants who live in London are from India, Jamaica, and Pakistan, and are non-white. “Immigrants didn’t become British through a simple process of adoption or assimilation” (McMann 623). Because British people were white “a black man could never be a British man” and black immigrants were considered alien and impossible to assimilate (Phillips 112). In 1945 a new type of racism appeared which was the racism based on cultural difference (McMann 623). *White Teeth* shows this reflection through characters like Archie’s boss Mr. Hero. Archie’s boss prefers not to invite him with his black wife, as Mr. Hero believes that “people begin to feel a bit uncomfortable” (Smith 72) with their marriage.

Again this type of racism can appear among immigrants too. The immigrants that live in Britain are afraid of not only the British but other immigrants as well, which can be linked to the process of assimilation (McMann 624). Like Samad and Alsana’s anxieties about their twins, they were afraid of racial and cultural hybridity. Mindi McMann has used Alsana’s dream as example of their fears. She had visions of “Millat (genetically BB; where B stands for Bengali-ness) marrying someone called
Sarah (aa where ‘a’ stands for Aryan), resulting in a child called Michael (Ba)” (Smith 327). Alsana dreams that her grandchildren (Ba) will be hybrid. Although they would be dominantly Bengali but Alsana’s fear is not about the genes but it is about their racial and cultural hybridity (Mcmann625).

Paul Jay argues that Zadie Smith has used global flows of populations and cultures, and Smith links the fate of its characters with the history of globalization. Jay insists that cultures and identities are marked by differences and hybridity everywhere because of globalization (174). The Iqbals and Bowdens suffer from the same kind of historical experiences and their children are almost confronting the same problems. They are struggling with constructing English identities that are rooted in their families’ complex history and the place (London) that produced them (Jay 160).

4.1 Multiculturalism in *White Teeth*

Multiculturalism is a new term for the multi-ethnic populations in a society. Immigration is not a new phenomenon in Britain; people from different ethnic groups have migrated to Britain for centuries. As the result of immigration and social changes society has been transformed to a more heterogeneous one. This means that multiculturalism is a development of the late twentieth century. Caleb Rosado defines multiculturalism, stating that “multiculturalism is a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society” (2). Heckmann states that immigrants who live in London try to defend their
origin, culture and roots but it is probably a hard process because of the increase and influence of multiculturalism and globalization. Thus a multicultural society can affect an immigrant’s culture or origin to the extent that a new form of multicultural culture might occur (Heckmann 245). In *White Teeth* Smith writes:

> 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. (Smith 326)

This quotation by Smith gives the idea of multiculturalism and shows London as a mixed place of different cultures. The characters in the novel emigrated from diverse places in the world and stayed in London. They live in London, the fact that the immigrants in *White Teeth* came from the former colonies (from Bangladesh and Jamaica), contributes to the complexity of identity for the characters, since multiculturalism have both positive and negative effects on the process of identity construction. The quotation mentions a number of names that are different to show the characters’ different belongings. Although the names are parts of identities these names cannot exactly determine an identity for these characters. Identity cannot be determined by names especially when the owners of these names live in a multicultural society, because the owner of these names are under the influence of multiculturalism and they may have changed their identity in some different ways. Moreover, *White Teeth* works as a multicultural novel, “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 qtd in Howland 6).

London is constructed by both the dominant (i.e. the British) culture and minority (immigrant) culture, but the members of immigrant communities try to adapt themselves to the dominant culture, for example Irie tries to change her ‘‘afro-hair’’ and straight her hair as British girls in order to be perceived as British. The minorities are especially afraid of representing their cultural identity because they think they will be treated as inferior (Rex 97). The minorities’ different culture is almost considered to be alien, particularly for the groups that believe in a different religion (Rex 169). Though multiculturalism means fighting against discrimination, stereotypes, separatism, racism, and assimilation, it also means creating respect and recognition between different races and ethnic groups (Hadjitian 28). Millat’s teacher asks “and we can learn about each other through each other’s culture, can’t we?” (Smith 156).

In addition, in the heterogeneous society, the English people and minority groups (immigrants) are afraid of losing their cultural identity. Therefore, some of the immigrants seek to find a source for their identity. People’s identities are mostly rooted in their place of birth, culture and religion. Minority groups live in the settlement country but they still have their links of kinship, religion, culture and territory with their homeland (Rex 208). Immigrants’ roots can be considered as the only source of their identification, although, most of the characters in the novel have left their roots.

Smith’s different portrayal of London as a multicultural city where people are living together can be considered as ironic, because this kind of multiculturalism affects
the individuals and makes them to unconsciously replace their cultural identity through
the simple process of assimilation with a new form of culture.

4.2 Culture, Traditions, and Identity

As mentioned, identity is the main theme in the novel, and most of the characters use
their cultural heritage and traditions as a part of their identity. Samad Iqbal is one of the
characters that always respects and cares about his culture and historical roots. To him
“tradition was culture, and culture led to roots, and these were good” (Smith 193). He
also insists that culture and roots are pure and nothing can change them. Samad does not
mean that “he could live by them” because he has lost them in many ways, but for him
“roots were roots and roots were good” (193). In this case, Samad tries to have roots not
for their importance or necessity but rather to have something that he can identify himself
with or to practice what have been practiced in the past, like his religion. For him religion
is an essential factor for his cultural identity, keeping his cultural spirit alive means
keeping his identity alive.

The first generations of migrants, like Samad, are more bound to their shared
identities through their culture, religion, traditions and language. Because their shared
religious and cultural values has produced this collective identity and many of them,
including Samad, took with them to London. But as long as Samad stays in London, he
changes some of his cultural practices “Oh, you should never have got religious, Samad.
It don’t suit you” (Smith 144). Shiva accuses Samad of losing his religion. Despite his
attempts, he has failed to raise his sons as true Bengalis. According to Samad, England
was the main reason for this cultural loss “I have been corrupted by England, I see that
now – my children, my wife, they too have been corrupted” (144). In this case, there is a fact: sometimes culture changes based on individuals’ location, Samad sees this change of place as corruption. It means that culture is linked to place. Samad shows his regret for coming to England: “I should never have come here- that’s where every problem has come from. Never should have brought my sons here, so far from God” (145).

Identity can be changeable according to space and time. However, people’s identities might be unchangeable if there is a stable situation (Leary and Tangney 81). It means identities are affected by individuals’ unstable situation. Though Irie’s mother lives in London, she was originally from Jamaica, and Irie struggles with her unstable situation. Magid and Millat have the same problem; even though Magid grew up in Bangladesh his first years in London have impacted his desire to somehow do the unthinkable, and that is ‘’changing’’ his identity. This unstable situation is another reason for their complex identity.

In other words, Samad contemplates the process of assimilation as corruption, because for him this would lead to the immigrants’ originality and cultural identity disappearing. Samad tells Archie, “I must concentrate on saving my sons” (Smith 189). He wants to save his sons from this corrupted place (London). Based on the theories it is possible to claim that it is difficult for the immigrants to save their identity because of diversity. Diversity could be seen as trouble for its influence on their lifestyle and cultural experiences (Park and Sarkar 224). I think when people live in another country than their homeland, it does not mean that they should be or are forced to practice all of the actions and traditions that the people of that country practice. Samad worries about his son’s fate
in London, which he discusses with Archie. He mentions Alsana’s sisters’ children; he believes that they are corrupted by the ‘’British way of life’’:

Well, take Alsana's sisters—all their children are nothing but trouble.

They won't go to mosque, they don't pray, they speak strangely, they dress strangely, they eat all kinds of rubbish, they have intercourse with God knows who. No respect for tradition. People call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption! (Smith 190)

For Samad, assimilation means destroying traditions. And he fears that it will make him lose his history and roots. He cannot accept that traditions change based on the change of time and space. He believes that traditions are unchangeable and one should hold them always. More importantly, nothing and no one could persuade Samad that culture and roots can be affected by some present factors, or can be changed during a time.

Likely, modernization and globalization are the two main factors for the change in the cultural identity of ethnic groups, for example: the minorities’ languages, life style, and cultural practices (Watson 71). But Samad cannot accept this fact and according to Alsana, Samad has “One leg in the present, and one leg in the past. No talking will change this” (Smith 80). According to Smith, it is one of the immigrants’ characteristics that “they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow” (466). This can be related to Rex’s argument that immigrants who live in London, but they still have links with their homeland and kinships, it means they are linked to their roots, culture, history and religion. However time and place play their roles in this case but Samad still says “I don’t wish to be a modern man! I wish to live as I was always meant to! I wish to return to the East!” (Smith 145). Samad does not want to change his
traditional way of life, he prefers to live in East and in this way he could practice his religious belief and traditions better.

Samad is more linked to the groups that he has similarities with who have the same religious practices and other cultural practices like himself; therefore, he does not want to be someone different, a Western man. He is proud of his identification as a member of ethnic and religious groups who are Muslims and Bengalis. It means that he tries to take his past with him. We can put Samad’s identification in Hall’s first position of cultural identity, one can identify Samad with the shared identity and the similarities that make oneness, a kind of identity that can be found among ethnic groups that have the same cultural and religious identity.

As discussed above, sometimes people can understand some aspects of their identities when they can answer the question who are you. Can the characters in White Teeth answer this question? Some of them can answer, some by mentioning their roots or some without mentioning their belongings. Or the answer can be changed depending on the time and place. Samad, identifies himself with his cultural identity, and for him religious identity is essential as well. When Samad and Archie were in the war and they found Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret alive, Samad asked Archie to kill him and show that he is a “Man”. Smith shows that the importance of identity differs from character to character. For example identity is important for Samad, for him even being a ‘’man’’ can be an identity determiner, but for Archie it is not. Archie does not worry about being identified or not, Samad criticizes him and argues that he is not useful because he does not have anything to use as a source of self-identity:
I want to know what kind of a man you are, Jones. I want to know what you are capable of. Are you a coward, Jones? […] You don’t stand for anything, Jones,’ continued Samad. ‘Not for faith, nor for a politics. Not even for your country. […] What are you going to tell your children when they ask who you are, what you are? Will you know? Will you ever know? […] I am a Muslim and a Man and a Son and a Believer” (Smith 121).

However, Jenkins (7) argues that some people practice what they are interested in a way that may appear opposite to how they are publicly represented or identified. Although Samad represents himself as a religious man still some of his actions are against his religion like drinking, and cheating on his wife Alsana by having an affair with Poppy. Though place and time have changed Samad’s behavior as a religious man, he constantly tries to use religion as his main identification. Samad keeps religion as his ancestor’s roots, and in this way he would have a sort of identification. For him religion is linked to traditions, and he thinks it shows who he is, not how he behaves.

4.3 Roots and History

Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* connects both characters’ pasts and presents to show the significance of the past in their present day. The identities of the characters are related to each individual’s history. In fact, *White Teeth* presents history and roots as the important part of individuals’ identities. The narrator wants to show that the characters’ history and roots (a source of identity that includes; religion, language, culture, and place of birth) are inescapable, that they go along with characters’ pasts, presents and futures, and they may construct a flexible identity. Smith emphasizes the importance of roots by titling three chapters by root canals “The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah
Iqbal”, “The Root Canals of Mangal Pande”, and “The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden”. Smith, in the last chapters of her novel, states that “this is the other thing about immigrants: they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow” (466). Although assimilation has affected the second generation of immigrants it does not mean that they have left their roots, since leaving roots is not an easy thing, but rather is painful and requires a long process of integration and assimilation. We come to see that personal history is a part of self-identification, since everyone needs or wants to know where they belong, and with whom they can identify themselves.

Consider Mr. Hamilton as an example. He is an old English man, and his way of thinking is opposite to, for example, Samad’s. Mr. Hamilton represents white Britons; he advises the children to take their wisdom teeth out very soon. Mr. Hamilton believes that wisdom teeth (roots) are harmful to deal with if you are not an adult; therefore, he prefers to “have them out” before you face problems. Mr. Hamilton’s speech can be interpreted in a different way. If the wisdom teeth, which he means are ‘’passed by the fathers’’ (Smith 173), are painful in a young age, then it is more painful to take them out in an adult age, because teeth are something passed by the father which means that it is something that is inherited from one’s ancestors. However as we know teeth have roots and roots are bound to the jawbone therefore when we want to “have them out” and be free from them, they will be more painful. This means that the sooner you do away with roots the better and less painful it is later. I see this as a metaphor for doing away with roots. For the second generation of migrants it is difficult to live with their parents’ roots in London. They have a dilemma; they need their parent’s cultural identity to identify
themselves with, but at the same time they are affected by multiculturalism and try to have their own different identities.

Mr. Hamilton teaches the children to brush their teeth. And he discusses the necessity of teeth and the function of wisdom teeth. Mr. Hamilton believes that one must be big enough for having these teeth. This can be related to Erikson’s explanation of identity, identity crisis begins when the individuals reach the adolescence stage. When one is big enough, it means that one is in the period of adolescence, and this is the stage of dealing with identity struggles. Mr. Hamilton says:

The problem with third morals is one is never sure whether one’s mouth will be quite large enough to accommodate them. They are the only part of the body that a man must grow into. He must be a big enough man for these teeth, do you see? Because if not – oh dear me, they grow crooked or any which way, or refuse to grow at all. They stay locked up there with the bone – an impaction, I believe, is the term – and terrible, terrible infection ensues. (Smith 173)

According to this quotation Smith points out those wisdom teeth are related to roots, and they are father’s teeth; according to Mr. Hamilton wisdom teeth are passed down by the father. When someone’s roots are discovered he/she must be big enough so that he/she will decide to protect them or take them out, and his/her mouth needs to be large as well. According to this speech, the second generations of immigrants are not big enough to make their own decisions; they are too young to think of their roots. We can think of the mouth as a metaphor for the young immigrants’ environment. Because the mouth and jawbones must be big enough when the wisdom teeth come out, the same thing goes with
the individual’s environment; it needs to be suitable for discovering their roots as well.

The young generation lives in London and their familial history and roots are complicated, which is a reason that they want to escape from it. And if the wisdom teeth ‘roots’ refuse to grow, they stay locked with the bone and this can be a big problem for its owner to keep them. Smith raises an expectation when Samad believes that one day Magid will thank him because he tried to teach him Bengali roots (201). Samad thought, Magid is too young to understand his father’s aim for sending him back to Bangladesh.

Though teeth are the strongest parts of the body, but still they can be damaged if they are not well protected. According to tooth metaphor, people can pull out their teeth but it is painful, and it is also hard to live without teeth. Furthermore roots are part of individuals’ identities and they are hard to be denied and painful to escape from, because people need to know where they come from and belong to. Zadie Smith also marks the role of roots and history by using many flashbacks. It shows that the past is important and it is a set-up for what may happen in the present day. In other words what is happening in the present is the result of an action of the past. The novel shows that Hortense and Samad’s being immigrants are the result of colonization in the past. Smith uses Hortense, Clara’s mother, to mark the significance of the past. Through Hortense’s scenes that lead us to go back to the past and history, we can clearly understand the complicated present.

As mentioned above, Samad tries to save his roots and history because they are the most important parts of his identity. But there are other characters that deny having roots and wish to be free from their familial roots and history. Irie, one of the main characters, is tired of her family’s problematic history and wants to escape from it. According to Hall, identity is what we have becoming and we cannot have one identity
for a long time because identity is a production. In this case we can see that Irie has similarities with her family and ethnic groups based on her skin color and history, but she tries to have different identity by leaving her familial roots. In other words, Irie is different, due to her attempts to look like white people and her desire to be one of them, because white people “don’t mind what their kids do in life as long as they are reasonably, you know, healthy. Happy. And every single fucking day is not this huge battle between who they are and who they should be, what they were and what they will be” (Smith 515). Irie says that for other people roots “doesn’t fucking matter. As far as they are concerned, it’s the past. This is what it’s like in other families” (Smith 515). This means that Irie’s interests are different or opposite of her identity. She wants to change or maintain an identity for her which can be flexible and different from her family’s past. Although Irie tries to escape from her family’s roots, Irie’s desire to go to Jamaica. For Irie: “It’s essential- I am young, I want some experiences. I have lived in this bloody suburb all my life. Everyone is the same here. I want to go and see the people of the world...” (Smith 377). Even if she is saying that she wants to see other people in the world she still chooses Jamaica, which shows her feeling of belonging. She wants to go back to what she thinks are her roots and where she came from. Her identity is more complex than the others characters, due to her hybridity (her Jamaican mother and English father). And the story of her mother’s boyfriend also made her doubt her real father which is another factor that makes Irie’s identity more complicated.

In White Teeth black women are similarly connected to each other, and they are rooted in their race and gender. However, their connection is not only based on their race and gender but it is based on their shared experiences of racism too (Amanda M. Watkins
Because of their colored skin and being among the minorities they are treated as inferior. Individuals are connected to groups and produced by related identity markers, because cultural or individual identity is a story that is continuous from the past to the present and to the future (Hirsch and Smith 8). Due to Irie’s connection to her mother and grandmother, she cannot feel a sense of belonging. Irie began to doubt her family’s history when she saw her mother’s fake teeth for the first time. “To her, this was yet another item in a long list of parental hypocrisies and untruths, this was example of the Jones/Bowden gift for secret histories, stories you never got told, history you never entirely uncovered,” (Smith 379). Her parents are full of stories, and she believes that she will never understand them. Smith shows the open ended history in individuals’ lifetimes, and the importance of the truth of history. These secret stories and lies have affected Irie, because history and the roots of family have constructed her present identity. “These parents were full of information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear. But she did not want it anymore, she was tired of it. She was sick of never getting the whole truth.” (Smith 379). Irie tries to escape from all of her family’s unrevealed stories.

At the same time Irie has an unborn daughter with unknown father at the end of the novel. She does not know who her child’s father is, due to the fact that she had sex with both Magid and Millat. Although her child has an unknown father, Irie feels happy because she thinks that her daughter will be free from roots, family ties and history. However, according to Hall’s theory identity comes from history and people usually give identification to the way that they are identified by the narratives of the past. In this way the novel raises the question whether Irie’s unborn daughter needs her family’s history to identify her, because the past is an essential concept that formulates identity.
4.4 Planned Identity

Although identity cannot be planned and constructed, Samad attempts many times to force his children to practice what he wants, to save their family roots and have the identity that Samad wishes. He sends Magid back to Bangladesh to grow up with Bengali traditions and religious beliefs. This means that he knows that the change of places has effects but he cannot accept it. However, he wishes that his boys will do what he plans, and he is not satisfied with his actions, saying “how can I teach my boys anything, how can I show them the straight road when I have lost my own bearings” (Smith 189). In quranic meaning the ‘straight road’ is the way to self-awareness, harmony and heaven. Thus Samad again admits that he has failed to show his sons the Islamic way of life as he has failed with his own. This is another emphasis by Samad on his religious identity.

Samad is a contradiction, sometimes he pretends that he is a good protector of his roots and culture, but sometimes he approves of his own bad behavior like cheating her wife by having an affair with another women and that he is not as a good man as he thinks he is.

Samad just like other immigrants is affected by the dominant culture. Although he wants to avoid the dominant culture and, to him, the ‘corrupted society’ unconsciously he is controlled by it and cannot escape from it.

The second generation of immigrants is struggling with identity and they want to escape from their familial roots and history. They are also different, and follow their own interests. Irie feels happy when she knows that she will never know who her daughter’s real father is, and her daughter will be free from her roots. This can be related to the concept of ‘planned identity’, what Irie wants to do is a sort of planning of an identity for her daughter just like Samad. Samad also wanted to plan his son’s identities; however
identity cannot be planned or chosen. Rather it has to be experienced and formed by internal and external influences.

Although Samad has planned what his sons will do, wanting them to go with him to Mecca, Magid refuses his father’s wish: “I CAN’T GO ON HAJ. I’VE GOT TO GO TO SCHOOL. I DON’T HAVE TIME TO GO TO MECCA” (Smith 152). Samad forces his son to be a religious man, which is a way to keep his roots alive. Familial roots make a sort of problem for the second generation of immigrants. For Magid going to Mecca is wasting time and he prefers to go to school. The second generation of immigrants is different from their family and the first generation due to the effects of the dominant culture. Likewise Irie, “half black, and half English” (Smith273) and Magid wish to be one of the Chalfens family, educated, and rich. This second generation of immigrants is changing their ethnic identity to adapt to the operating environment around them. They belong to minority groups still they are different and their identities cannot determine their behavior. Individual goals, values and beliefs represent personal identity which may or may not relate to one’s cultural group (Schwartz and et al. 10). This can be defined according to Hall’s second position. The second generations of immigrants have similarities with their ethnic groups regarding their language, and ethnic identities and skin color but at the same time they are different from the first generations of immigrants, think differently, and want to change or renew their identity. But this is due to the influence of diversity and the dominant culture.

In addition, some of the immigrants may attempt to adapt to the dominant culture in a society because they do not feel fulfilled with their own, they feel ashamed of their familial traditions, religion, and language or the English people let them feel inferior and
alienated. The immigrant members, who could be successful in adapting to the dominant society, are the immigrants that have been afraid of their different culture and those who are afraid of being represented as inferior (Rex 97).

Magid Iqbal is one of those in the second generation of immigrants who try to change his identity and adapt to the British culture. Magid is influenced by multiculturalism and globalization; he is, according to Samad, “always trying to be somebody that you are not” and “YOU WANT TO BE CALLED MARK SMITH” (Smith 150-1). Magid changes his name to be like his white friends in school. This action by Magid shows the conflict between his own interest and his ‘planned identity’, his father plans an identity for him and wants him to be a proper Muslim but his interests are different he wants to be like English people. Relating to Richard Jenkins’s theory of similarity and difference, Magid is different from his ethnic group and background but similar to the dominant culture in London. Irie, like Magid, has the same wishes; she goes to the salon to straighten her hair. The children of immigrants are not bound to their parental roots, culture and place of birth, as their parents are and they are also not bound to the values and practices in the same way as their ancestors (Levitt 1226). The immigrant’s children are almost embraced of their familial norms, according to Levitt most of the immigrant’s children do not choose their family’s cultural identity or the dominant culture rather they balance them both. They do not practice their ancestors’ traditions or the dominant’s instead they make different choices by creating own principles, values and traditions.
5. Conclusion

In the 20th century, the number of immigrants increased drastically in England, as a result of British de-colonialism. People from different places migrated to England, seeking a better life and destiny for themselves and their children. In the settlement country the immigrants and the minority groups in theory lost their cultural identity or felt that it was about to disappear. Zadie Smith’s White Teeth shows a group of immigrants’ life in London. It represents multiculturalism as the main cause for the characters’ identity crises. At the same time the ambiguity of roots and history can be another cause in constructing identity crisis as well, because the characters’ pasts are unclear and complicated. Smith’s novel shows the difficulty of roots and history for the characters’ present day situations. In White Teeth some of the characters tried to save their roots, but they were unconsciously affected by multiculturalism and the dominant culture in London, which is to say, the British culture. On the other hand the young characters want to escape from their parents’ roots, histories and values.

When people identify themselves and when they know who they are or what they are, this can also show the similarities and differences between people’s identity. People have similarities with their ethnic groups, at the same time they are different because they have joined other groups or adapted to the dominant culture of a society. That’s to say one needs to mention both similarities and differences in his/her identity. But in recent years, people (the second generation of immigrants) seem to be more different and they escape from the similarities that bound them to their ethnic groups. Each of the characters in White Teeth has their own identities within a particular or individual background.
It is important to understand that Samad’s identity as the first generation of immigrants is based on his familial and religious roots and history. But the second generation of immigrants’ identities are more related or based on their interests such as Magid and Irie’s identity construction. They have chosen what they are interested in, and sometimes their behavior is the opposite of their public identity. For example, Magid’s behavior is almost like British children but he was expected to be Bengali and Muslim by his father, and Irie as a Jamaican immigrant and despite her black skin, she tried to appear like a white British girl. Samad can also be counted as one of the conflicted characters; he identifies himself as Muslim but he does not behave like a proper religious man. That is to say, people’s identities cannot always determine the way people behave, and neither can their behavior determine their identification.

The most important point is that identity is something that cannot be constructed by will or be planned, because identity is something that is changeable based on time and space for example Samad always wants to plan an identity for his sons, but he is unsuccessful. Identity cannot be stopped from renewing, and one cannot predict a “future identity”. When people do not feel comfortable with their cultural identity, they will try to change it and to create another identity that they want to be identified by.

Thus, people may try to change their cultural identity but it would be difficult because roots cannot be denied. Roots and history are inescapable or continuing and recurrent concerns in human life. Overall, people can affect (not construct) identity but they cannot affect and choose their roots and history.

In general, for the immigrants in the novel, their collective identity is important, such as shared belonging, religious beliefs and a commitment for unity. Although
immigrants, ethnic groups, do not live with their homeland still they practice their traditions and have links with their familial identity. Due to the big influence of multiculturalism and globalization on the immigrants, their cultural identity may have been changed or mixed with the dominant (British) culture. The Iqbals are Smith’s example to explain for us how two cultures have been mixed. Millat and Magid are under the influence of British culture, both practicing the dominant culture. We can think of racism and class discrimination as one of the reasons that make immigrants think of changes and practicing what the British people practice.

To conclude, according to the theories I have used, identity can go along with every stage of life, and is not a stable concept. One is able to renew and affect one’s identity with new interests, places and relationships. It is obvious in Smith’s White Teeth that the characters try to change their identity according to their interests, their different stages of life or situations. Magid Iqbal has somehow changed parts of his identity during his short life; first he was in London and changed his name (he wanted to be called Mark Smith), then he was sent back to Bangladesh to behave like a Muslim man, and later he came back with a different identity, his religious identity having disappeared (he work with the Chalfens and want to be a lawyer). This shows the flexibility of identity, especially for the second generation of immigrants. The second generations of immigrants are forced to practice and to have the same identity and roots as their parents which they cannot accept and attempt to escape from. Although multiculturalism and globalization affect individuals’ identities roots and history they will still play their role even in the individuals’ new identities.
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