Have You Ever Thought of Teaching … Zadie Smith’s White Teeth?

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Teaching contemporary writing for the post-2008 A-Level has been a welcome innovation: contemporary writing can be vibrantly inventive, experimental and challenging. The lack of canonicity is itself stimulating: who knows whether McEwan, Ishiguro or Kate Atkinson will be highly regarded in the future? There is no intimidating body of critical material to baffle (or plagiarise!) and that, too, should be liberating. And in terms of ‘contextuality’, students may, refreshingly, know far more than their teachers.

Zadie Smith’s White Teeth (2000) is an energetic and exuberant novel which repays study, either as a ‘stand-alone’ text or in comparison with, say, Andrea Levy’s Small Island or Monica Ali’s Brick Lane as part of a specifically postcolonial topic. It is, of course, a uniquely youthful text, commenced when Smith was still an undergraduate student and it has exceptional linguistic vigour. The novel is structured through four sections, each of which explores the protagonists’ past and present: ‘Archie 1974, 1945; Samad 1984, 1857; Irie 1990, 1907; Magid, Millat and Marcus 1992, 1999’. The epigraph to the text, ‘What’s past is prologue’ (from The Tempest) highlights a major theme – that personalities are shaped by larger events, in which they might have had little or no role to play. The ‘back story’ of World War II, the Indian Mutiny, and the Kingston Earthquake seems an inescapable part of characters’ lives in late twentieth-century north London. Smith fuses fictionality with the factual throughout – key historical moments are interwoven with references to more recent events such as the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the storm of 1987, the fatwa against Salman Rushdie for Satanic Verses. At the same time Smith pursues a motif of futurism as the scientist Marcus Chalfen experiments with the possibility of eliminating the random from genetic makeup. So the novel’s unique character derives, in part, from this blend of everyday life in Willesden, the BBC news, and the bizarre sci-fi world of FutureMouse. Both subject and text demonstrate Smith’s engagement with hybridity:
This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigration 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. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks.

Cultural hybridity is often seen as Smith’s defining subject and ‘Happy Multicultural Land’ is both mocked and celebrated. The well-meaning political correctness of the school community is particularly susceptible: when Samad questions the validity of Harvest Festival at primary school, the headmistress is quite ready with her defence:

Mr Iqbal, we have been through the matter of religious festivals quite thoroughly in the autumn review. As I am sure you are aware, the school already recognizes a great variety of religious and secular events: amongst them, Christmas, Ramadan, Chinese New Year, Diwali, Yom Kippur, Hannukah, the birthday of Haile Selassie, and the death of Martin Luther King. The Harvest Festival is part of the school’s ongoing commitment to religious diversity, Mr Iqbal.

The key families of the text exemplify this pluralism, introducing Jamaican, Bangladeshi and Jewish perspectives. Their children, in particular Irie, Millat and Joshua, negotiate the complexities of their multicultural context with varying degrees of success. Millat, with overwhelming confidence, is master of his world: in the Shakespeare lesson –

‘One more word from you Mr Ick-Ball and you are out!’
‘Shakespeare. Sweaty. Bollocks. That’s three. Don’t worry, I’ll let myself out.’

And, adroitly, when responding to Joyce Chalfen’s patronising curiosity:

‘Well ... you look very exotic. Where are you from, if you don’t mind me asking?’
‘Willesden,’ said Irie and Millat simultaneously.
‘Yes, yes, of course, but where originally?’
‘Oh,’ said Millat, putting on what he called a *bud-bud-ding-ding* accent. ‘You are meaning where from am I originally.’
Joyce looked confused. ‘Yes, originally.’
‘Whitechapel,’ said Millat, pulling out a fag. ‘Via the Royal London Hospital and the 207 bus.’

Where Millat knows that he is the youthful god of his small universe, Irie is a teenager attempting to inhabit a different body and a different world. She is irresistibly seduced by the Chalfen household with its middle-class assumption of superiority:

When Irie stepped over the threshold of the Chalfen household she felt an illicit thrill, like a Jew munching a sausage, or a Hindu grabbing a Big Mac. She was crossing borders, sneaking into England; it felt like some terribly mutinous act ...

Smith’s comedy is far darker here and Irie’s decision to transform her Afro curls into long straight hair, has painful and (temporarily) disastrous consequences:

‘What have you done? You had beautiful hair, man. All curly and wild. It was gorgeous.’ ...
‘I just had a haircut. What’s the big deal?’
‘But that’s not your hair, for fuck’s sake, that’s some poor oppressed Pakistani woman who needs the cash for her kids’, said Neena, giving it a tug and being rewarded with a handful of it.

As Irie and Millat wrestle with their adolescent problems of identity, the political world they inhabit is about to become culturally explosive. The novel pre-dates the 9/11 attacks on America yet is extraordinarily prescient in the way that Smith treats the subject of book burnings in England and the rise of Islamist fundamentalism – indeed, the epigraph to the final section of the novel includes a dictionary definition of ‘fundamentalism’. In *White Teeth* the subject is refracted through Millat’s growing dissatisfaction with his life and its prospects:

He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from ... 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. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in this country, until the week before last when suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry, and Millat recognized the anger, thought it recognized him, and grabbed it with both hands.

On the basis of this newly discovered rage, Millat and his crew are travelling to Bradford to burn copies of *Satanic Verses* – they haven’t read it but can still glory in their collective indignation. For Millat, the political conversion to KEVIN – Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation (and they know they have an ‘acronym problem’) is his love of clans. For his father, Samad, the situation is altogether darker and inherently hopeless. An intelligent and troubled man, attempting to preserve the essence of his faith and his traditions while increasingly disillusioned with England, he is marooned in a job which is at best monotonous and at worst insulting. He would like to bear a placard proclaiming, ‘I AM NOT A WAITER. I HAVE BEEN A STUDENT, A SCIENTIST, A SOLDIER ... I AM A MUSLIM BUT ALLAH HAS FORSAKEN ME OR I HAVE FORSAKEN ALLAH ...’ His marriage is a torment to him and his relationship with his sons negligible; even his brief love affair fails to bring him any joy. At the end of the text he feels a tired sympathy for Hortense and her religious certainties, ‘He knows what it is to seek. He knows the dryness. He has felt the thirst you get in a strange land – horrible, persistent – the thirst that lasts your whole life.’

Samad is specifically connected with two key aspects of the novel’s historical past; his own role in World War II, and the history of Mangal Pande, his great-grandfather, in the Indian Mutiny. Both the experienced event and the story accruing around the events of 1857 play a part in shaping his character and actions. They also contribute to the novel’s conceptual framework: the imperial past is, of course, of significance in a novel dealing with postcolonialism and Zadie Smith deftly introduces a story emerging from Victorian military aggression in India. She also makes the point that imperialism has its own narratives, that the history of a nation is ‘open to its own fictionalization.’ The story Samad has inherited both elevates him but also gives him an uncomfortable sense that he too must fulfil a heroic destiny. He joins the British Army in World War II in order to fight fascism, and his passionate zeal is undefeated by the casual racism of his British colleagues. The ending of the war in Europe might seem a world away from his later life in north London, but a key event in all the confusion of the British and Russian advances makes a link with
the bizarre events at the end of the novel. Stranded in a remote Bulgarian village in the final days of the war, Archie and Samad discover a solitary Nazi prisoner. Samad understands that ‘Dr Sick’ is a Nazi eugenicist, ‘breeding people as if they were so many chickens, destroying them if the specifications are not correct. He wants to control, to dictate the future.’ The pusillanimous Archie fails to execute him and the doctor survives, to become, much later, the mentor and inspiration to Marcus Chalfen – an added irony as Marcus is Jewish. The overarching theme of colour, race, history comes full circle in the final pages with the demonstration of FutureMouse. A comically brilliant dénouement.

This pattern of past and present is paralleled with the story of Hortense, born in the Kingston (Jamaica) earthquake. Her mother, Ambrosia, has been seduced by Captain Charlie Durham who educates her and intends to marry her. But the governor of Jamaica will not make exceptions; Ambrosia cannot travel back to England and Hortense is the miracle child born amidst the chaos of earthquake. Her life is thereafter spent anticipating the apocalypse; the world will end and the chosen will be saved. The apocalyptic theme is comically suggested at the opening of the novel where Archie is rescued from his bodged suicide attempt and proceeds to foist himself upon a New Year party that has a banner proclaiming, ‘in large rainbow coloured lettering ... WELCOME TO THE ‘END OF THE WORLD’ PARTY, 1975.’ He meets Clara here, a young woman who, as Hortense’s daughter, is all too familiar with the notion of Armageddon.

At the end of the novel Smith draws together all the various strands of her plot as everyone moves across London towards Marcus and his FutureMouse event. Perhaps the most liberating statement comes from Irie who interrupts the ongoing squabble between the Iqbal and Jones families to protest against their determination to re-live their history:

... other families [are] not self-indulgent. They don’t run around, relishing, relishing the fact that they are utterly dysfunctional. They don’t spend their time trying to find ways to make their lives more complex. They just get on with it. Lucky bastards.

Irie’s objections to their obsession with the past is a result of her own newly discovered commitment to a future life: she is pregnant with either Millat’s or Magid’s child. Despite all the sophistication of Marcus’s genetic science, there is no means of discerning the difference between the genetic code of identical twins. Irie can see, however, that the uncertainty
of this is itself an advantage:

Irie's child can never be mapped exactly nor spoken of with any certainty. Some secrets are permanent. In a vision, Irie has seen a time, a time not far from now, when roots won’t matter any more because they’re too long and they’re too tortuous and they’re just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it.

The unquenchable optimism of the text inheres in this future vision. Individuals can break from the oppression of the past. Smith also celebrates the unpredictable and random in human affairs; at the end of the text, Archie has, for the second time, prevented the death of the eugenicist doctor, in a split second of spontaneous action. The scientific miracle of FutureMouse "[dashes] along the table, and through the hands of those who wished to pin it down ... [to] disappear through an air vent. Go on my son! thought Archie'.

For the reluctant reader, *White Teeth* looks all too substantial – it isn’t *Of Mice and Men*. But students respond to its vibrancy; it’s a big fizzing explosion of language, life, London. There are issues of science and ethics to discuss; sex, politics and religion are inescapable. And, best of all, perhaps, an entire A-Level group ... laughed.