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History Turned "Upside Dung": The English as Underdog in Zadie Smith's White Teeth

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History Turned "Upside Dung": The English as Underdog in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

CAMILLE ISAACS

"How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?" Jamaica Kincaid

Few would counter-argue that the recent war in Iraq has reinforced the notion that the nineteenth-century, imperial superpower of Great Britain had been replaced by the globalized, imperial superpower of the US. The independence of Britain's invaded colonies, beginning in 1947 and expedited in the 1960s, and the subsequent migration of many colonials to the mother country has led to a multicultural and changing national identity. In addition, Britain found itself facing violent and destructive race riots in the summer of 2001, often pitting down-and-out, lower-class white males against brown-skinned, second-generation "Brits." Britain's identity was changing, and it was often the immigrants and their children who were leading the change. In 2000, Zadie Smith, whose mother immigrated to England from Jamaica, published one of the most celebrated books of the publishing season, *White Teeth*. Smith plays with the notion of Britain as vanquished, ultimately dismissing the idea, because of the nation's continued internal hegemony. The thought of Britain becoming the vanquished or marginal power posed a real threat in the view of such figures as the right-wing extremist Enoch Powell and former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The turnabout of events was considered highly ironic by many colonials, such as Jamaican poet Louise "Miss Lou" Bennett. Smith's reaction is less bipartisan: she provides a wonderful, chaotic, diverse response to a nation undergoing changes to its national identity. The climax of Smith's 500-page novel is a cacophony of interpretations, a confusion of contradictory accounts, a solution-less ending. But this is precisely the novel's point. As various minority positions are included in Britain's definition and projection of itself, no one homogenous narrative emerges. It can be both victor and vanquished, a necessary step in reconceptualizing the nation, the future of "Englishness," and England's place in the world.

At the end of the novel, the various social groups have all gathered at the Perret Institute on December 31, 1992, each group eager to assert its version of history, to make sure its particular minority voice is included. The members of FATE (Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation) are there to save the genetically modified FutureMouse. The members of the other acronymous group, KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation), were planning to avenge the wrongs done to all Muslims and minorities, but will settle for reading parts of the Koran. The Jehovah's Witnesses are there to warn of the coming apocalypse. And Clara, Archie, Samad, and Alsana are there grudgingly because they have been told good parents support their children (Magid and Irie). When a shot is fired and the mouse escapes, no single, coherent account of what has occurred remains. The judge, whose job it is to find the "truth," ultimately gives up and assigns community service to both and whichever of the twins fired the shot. And Irie's unborn child (fathered by one of the twins) "can never be mapped exactly nor spoken of with any certainty" (Smith 527).

While nothing is for certain in Smith's revised England, she does "take the teeth" out of the idea of England as the vanquished. Her new bite on history uses teeth as the symbol through which history is shown at first to be rooted, then decaying, and later replaced by new histories, sometimes

providing a new outlook, sometimes just a superficial cosmetic change. With these new notions of history come new concepts of nationhood. The emergence of new teeth changes the shape of the mouth, as it were. Benedict Anderson has argued that "nation" is a constructed concept, and that nation and citizen are not always conceived of as mutually inclusive. The new teeth do not always fit properly. Smith uses the trope of teeth to explore Britain's changing place in history. I will also show how she satirizes some British nationals' fear of becoming the vanquished by juxtaposing Bennett's "Colonization in Reverse" with Smith's text. A reverse postcolonial reading will be shown to be untenable, however, because Britain still maintains much of its hegemony.

Smith's ultimate aim of multiple histories, multiple truths for the future of England must first confront the continued British hegemony in most aspects of postwar life. She well illustrates that the face of Britain is still white, and is the model against which visible minorities are compared. Most minorities continue to find themselves measured, and fight to defend themselves, against, what Stuart Hall calls "the embattled, hegemonic conception of 'Englishness'" ("New Ethnicities" 227). The novel's immigrants and their children realize they are not yet included in this concept: "no one [who] looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever in the news unless they had recently been murdered. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country" (Smith 234). "Englishness" is maintained through immigration policies, racist attitudes, and even the use of language.

This continued control over language is illustrated through the word "pandy." Samad claims that his great-grandfather was Mangal Pande, the leader of the failed Indian mutiny against the British Raj in 1857. Samad is most upset about the fact that as hard as he tries to fix the reputation of his ancestor, he cannot yet lessen English linguistic hegemony. Archie makes a point of showing Samad the English definition of pandy: "Any fool or coward in a military situation" (251). Samad argues for a different kind of history: "The truth does *not* depend on what you read" (256). In maintaining the more traditional usage of pandy, British society can also maintain much of its hegemony and its version of history. Linguistic hegemony is an integral part of imperialism. Continued use of the term reinforces Britain's version of the events of 1857 – Pande was a fool and a traitor; Britain was the victor; and Samad and other colonials are thus constructed as the vanquished.

Samad is relentless in his pursuit of a redeemed reputation for his great-grandfather, and in so doing, he is trying to posit a revised notion of history. This is, as Steven Connor writes, not "the discrediting of history, [so much] as the acceleration and diversification of its modes and meanings" (163). Samad is, in a sense, trying to lessen British control over history by proposing his ancestor be considered a hero. What Samad does not realize is that his version of events is just another version, and it will be undercut by the second generation in the same way he wishes to undercut the official British version. The interpretation of his son, Millat, is not nearly as complimentary: "'Great-grandfather – [...] Decides to fuck the English – [...] all on his Jack-Jones, spliffed up to the eyeballs, tries to shoot his captain, misses, tries to shoot himself, misses, gets hung [...]. End of story. Boring'" (226). The multiplicity of history often brings contradictory interpretations. Millat's version, while not as reverential as Samad would like, still undercuts the British account and the British take on history. For Millat, whether Samad tells it or the traditional history book tells it, the story of the Indian Mutiny and Mangal Pande is irrelevant to his current situation and is "boring." A new version of history is posited, however, because in Millat's version of history, neither Mangal Pande nor the British are victorious.

Part of the reason official Britain is so keen to hold on to its traditional version of history is that it is a reminder of past glory and key to its definition of self as the victor. Reliving the war, through an attachment to a then-global power, allows Samad and Archie to be less marginal for a while and to

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conceive of themselves as heroes. This is why Samad and Archie are so upset when they realize they have “missed the bloody war” (105). The first attempted killing of the collaborationist, Dr. Perret, is a desire to belong to a traditional version of history, a version that views victory in terms of the number of enemy slaughtered and the number of medals won: “This war was to have been his [Samad’s] opportunity. He was expected to come home covered in glory, and then return to Delhi triumphant. When would he ever have another chance? There were going to be no more wars like this one, everybody knew that” (105). Hall writes that Britain has defined itself by its pre-1945 position: “we seem to possess no other viable vocabulary in which to cast our sense of who the British people are and where they are going, except one drawn from the inventory of a lost imperial greatness” (*Hard Road* 68). And the current generation is completely uninterested in that version of history: Their “eyes glazed over, fingers tapped. [...] No one really wanted to *know*” (Smith 14).

Smith’s plays with teeth—wisdom teeth, rotten teeth, white teeth—to show Britain’s changing position after the war. The Britain she describes is like a rotten tooth. Britain won the war but found itself with a huge wartime debt. Due to extensive destruction from German bombing, a massive rebuilding of infrastructure was necessary. Colonies were beginning to assert their independence and threatening to pull away—lessening the country’s economic might as well as its status as a global power. Many Englishmen were immigrating to the colonies leaving Britain with a population shortage. As Kathleen Paul argues, Britain found itself facing “imperial realignment, demographic crisis, financial difficulty, and labour shortage” (7), a decay mirrored in Smith’s text. England is not portrayed as victorious, but as dirty, ugly, and malfunctioning: “Mo [...] looked out over Cricklewood, surveying the discarded armchairs and strips of carpet, outdoor lounges for local drunks; the slot-machine emporiums, the greasy spoons and the minicabs—all covered in shit” (5). What is in decay is not just postwar England, but postwar definitions of “Englishness.”

Part of the reason Britain is in such a state of decay is that it had relied heavily on its position as empire (“the sun never sets . . .”) and its status as a global military power to define itself. With the postwar realignment brought about by the Cold War, Britain could no longer define itself in terms of its international position. It found itself defining the nation based on an “extremely weak, post-imperial economic base” (Hall, *Hard Road* 30). This decline is illustrated in Smith’s novel through the figure of Thomas Dickinson-Smith, captain of Samad’s and Archie’s regiment:

Killed by the Hun, the Wogs, the Chinks, the Kaffirs, the Frogs, the Scots, the Spics, the Zulus, the Indians (South, East, and Red), and accidentally mistaken for a darting okapi by a Swede on a big-game hunt in Nairobi, traditionally the Dickinson-Smiths were insatiable in their desire to see Dickinson-Smith blood spilled on foreign soil. [...] this Dickson-Smith couldn’t seem to manage it. (89-90)

It is ironic that only through suicide can the Dickinson-Smith family now obtain any “glory.” In defining one’s position by death in battle alone, the only way Dickinson-Smith (and Britain, for that matter) can maintain conceptions of self is through his own demise. He becomes the first Dickinson-Smith “to die by English hands” when he shoots himself (92). Britain can only revitalize itself through a new definition of its place in the world and a new definition of how it views its history.

And Smith uses the immigrants and their children to show how this new identity is being shaped. She plays with these ideas through the trope of teeth. When Clara first comes to England, she has buck teeth (27). Prominent, unmissable, like the many brown-skinned immigrants, she sticks out. The knocking out of Clara’s teeth in a moped accident signifies the knocking out of an old view of history because it is at this point that she begins to give up her faith in the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

When Clara starts a new life with Archie, she starts it with a new set of dentures (49). Teeth, here, move from symbolizing the past (her roots in Jamaica), to her maladjustment as an immigrant in England, to a new start with their removal. Her teeth (and outlook) are reborn through a set of dentures.

Clean, white teeth, however, do not necessarily symbolize a clean, fresh start. In the same way that cosmetic dentistry fixes the superficial aspects of one's dental work, it can also signify a superficial change in one's outlook. Archie's boss is a case in point: Kelvin Hero has a "double row of pearly whites that owed more to expensive dentistry than to regular brushing" (70). His white teeth are not the result of his own hard work ("regular brushing") or new thinking. He can afford to buy a new outlook, at least on the surface. Below the surface, however, old ideas still function: "I'd spit on that Enoch Powell . . . but then again he does have a point, doesn't he? There comes a point, a saturation point, and people begin to feel a bit uncomfortable " (72). The teeth change but the bite remains the same.

It is the immigrants and particularly their offspring, however, who are seen as solving the nation's dental/historical problems. Samad is said to have "the whitest teeth" (50), and Irie becomes a dentist after Marcus suggests that she is not smart enough to be a scientist. As a young, black woman entering a traditionally male profession, she is able to transform concepts of the immigrants' and their offspring's place in British society. Through dentistry she creates herself and history anew: "She was like her mother, like her father—a great reinventor of herself, a great make-doer" (368). Control over Britain's self-conception is strictly in the hands of a different generation.

Smith is not suggesting, however, that all the original teeth have to be removed to make room for a new version of history. The removal of all of one's original teeth still symbolizes powerlessness, illustrated in the novel through J. P. Hamilton, the elderly man the children visit as part of a harvest festival. He has a full set of dentures and has no "bite" whatsoever. He says he "simply cannot eat anything unless it has been pulverized beforehand, you see. My own fault. Years and years of neglect" (171). The question for Smith is more importantly one of how much of the past one should keep, illustrated through wisdom teeth. The answer is different for everyone. Some people have space in their mouth for their wisdom teeth (the past); others need to make room: "The problem with third molars is one is never sure whether one's mouth will be quite large enough to accommodate them" (173). If one does not cope with the past, it will "stay locked up there with the bone—an impaction" will result (173). The first sign of a problem is "something degenerate, deep within the gums" (193). Failure to treat the death and decay of the roots (the past), will result in a swollen, disruptive eruption, like the race riots that raged in England in 2001. Connor writes that change can be difficult, "testifying to the need for sometimes painful forms of transformation, even revolution" (133). Extensive dental work may be required to reconstruct the root so that it will support the new teeth; fittingly, then, Smith shows many of her characters undergoing metaphoric root canals (Archie and Samad, 83; Mangal Pande, 244; Hortense Bowden, 356).

At the heart of Smith's construction of decay is the death of an idea. What has died is not just a version of history but concepts of Englishness and nationhood. Simon Gikandi writes that there is an essentializing element in Englishness that seeks to put forward a type of national morality: "colonial readers were being asked to leave their differences behind and join the common community of Englishness" (651). The colonized were historically expected to repress any unique characteristics and become British in order to be accepted. Paul Gilroy, likewise, argues that the way Englishness was conceptualized was exclusive of most colonial immigrants, who were "judged to be incompatible with authentic forms of Englishness" (46). Both Gikandi and Gilroy agree, however, that what needs to change is not the idea of an "Englishness," but what that Englishness comprises. "What

must be challenged is the way that these apparently unique customs and practices are understood as expressions of a pure and homogenous nationality" (Gilroy 69). What Smith appears to be suggesting in her novel is not that the various immigrants lose their distinctiveness, but that the concept of "Englishness" accommodate these former colonials into its self-definition, that the victor envelope the vanquished in its self-definition.

This change is not emanating from the British, as it is the immigrants who are leading the charge in the way that the country redefines itself. Alsana asserts that the symbols of Englishness remain, but the "English" no longer do, if they ever did. She says that "'it's still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It's a fairy-tale'" (Smith 236). The vast number of immigrants who entered England in the postwar period has forced a re-classification, a changed national identity. In "Postcolonial Differend" Vijay Mishra argues that concepts of Englishness are changing in contemporary Britain: "[To] be British in a post-diaspora Britain is to be conscious of multiple heritages and peoples' conflicting participation in the long history of Britain" (23). The new identification means that the world should not be viewed in terms of self and other but an acknowledgement that the self is really an other. With global realignment and the margins moving to the centre, the entire paradigm of centre and margin is altered. If the centre and margin can both shift, everyone has the possibility of being the opposite of one's traditional construction. Smith writes that "there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English" (327). They are centre and margin at the same time: English and Indian, self and other.

Smith likewise portrays an England in which characters occasionally switch between the centre and the margin. Samad, usually the marginal figure, becomes central when he kidnaps the weekly school council meetings until he is granted his ransom of concessions. The music teacher, Poppy Burt-Jones informs the class: "'It's because of Mr. Iqbal that next week we won't be playing Swan Lake any more'" (154). It is a petty sort of central power, perhaps, but it is a power nonetheless. Samad's son also has a type of control in his engaging sexual appeal: "All women, of every shade, from midnight-black to albino, were Millat's" (368). Smith calls it a "marvellous, indiscriminate power" (369), the "power of Millat's attractiveness" (331). Millat's influence causes the Chalfens to give him hundreds of pounds; it causes Joshua Chalfen to confess to possessing and smoking marijuana so that some of Millat's "power" will rub off; and it causes what seems like hundreds of girls to drop their British knickers. While Samad and Millat are portrayed primarily as marginal figures in the novel, they occasionally shift to the centre in a way that frightens some "Brits."

The power balance has the potential to change so much that one might think that Britain was the vanquished and was being colonized in reverse, an idea Louise "Miss Lou" Bennett satirizes in her 1960s poem "Colonization in Reverse." The irony of Bennett's poem is that she jokingly shows Jamaicans adopting the very best of British qualities: imperialism. By being "more British than the British" and becoming "colonizers," the Jamaicans threaten to beat the British at their own game:

Wat a joyful news, Miss Mattie,
I feel like me heart gwine burs'
Jamaica people colonizing
Englan in reverse [...]
What an islan! What a people!
Man an woman, old an young
Jusa pack dem bag an baggage
An tun history upside dung! [...]
An week by week dem shippin off

Dem countryman like fire,
 Fe immigrate an populate
 De seat o' de Empire.
 Oonoo [You plural] see how life is funny,
 Oonoo see de tunabout,
 Jamaica live fe box bread
 Outa English people mout.' [...]
 Wat a devilment a Englan!
 Dem face war an brave de worse,
 But I'm wonderin' how dem gwine stan'
 Colonizin' in reverse. (179-80)

Bennett projects the British will have to grit their bad teeth and swallow some of their own medicine, tongue-in-cheek. With telling irony, she uses a humorous tone to describe what many British at the time considered very serious.

When Enoch Powell gave his famous "Rivers of Blood" speech in 1968, he was vilified by many and quickly shuffled out of the shadow cabinet. But he raised an issue that he said many of his constituents were feeling. He did not phrase it ironically, as Bennett does, but the language he used suggests his constituents feared being seen as the vanquished, being the subject of a type of "colonization in reverse." There was a concern, as Margaret Thatcher put it, of being "swamped by people with a different culture" ("1981 Riots Timeline"). Smith toys with this notion of Britain feeling colonized, but she is ultimately mocking of this position, as she demonstrates that this inversion of history does not actually work. As I will show below, if Britain is the colonized, one could apply a postcolonial reading to its position in the novel. But this postcolonial "tunabout" fails because this reverse colonization contains no real power.

The passage in which Irie and the twins visit Mr. J. P. Hamilton amply illustrates this idea of reverse colonization. The children have been sent to visit the elderly as part of their school's charity program, the Harvest Festival. Their visit is the traditional colonial encounter turned upside down. As was the case with the European explorers of the seventeenth century, the children arrive on Mr. Hamilton's doorstep with their version of imperial trinkets and potentially poisonous goods. Irie brings a coconut and the twins bring "four cans of past-their-sell-by-date chickpeas" (Smith 161). Because he is toothless/powerless, Hamilton says the most he could manage out of the goods the children have brought him is "probably the milk in that coconut" (170), as if the milk is just sitting inside the nut waiting to be taken out. The coconut functions as a useless imperial trinket because it is unlikely he would be familiar with the process of retrieving the milk. If he does not realize that he would have to crack the nut, grate the pulp, soak it in water, and drain the result to produce coconut milk, the coconut functions as a useless trinket. It is the equivalent of explorers bringing the natives instruments without showing them how to use them.

The reverse colonization of the children "discovering" the elderly is heightened by the older, brown Samad's "exploration" of the young, white Poppy Burt-Jones. While the children are engaged in their own type of colonial encounter, the twins' father is involved in a different type of conquest – the sexual sort. Like the explorers before him, Samad ponders what is the best "bauble" to bring that will impress the "Other": "three minutes were left for Samad to consider what an old man brings a young girl; something an old brown man brings a young white girl at the crossroads of four black streets; something suitable . . ." (166). His paramour, the twins' teacher Poppy Burt-Jones, is said to be "perplexed" at the sight of her own useless, imperial trinket—a coconut (166).

Just as European exploration was done in the name of religion, the children's visit is phrased in the same language. Millat, one of the twins, says, "'He's got to wantit. [...] 'Sgod's harvest, innit?'" (169). As was the case with the natives before him, Mr. Hamilton is not so sure he wants the goods being brought to him. Irie arrives with some of her traditional heritage, Jamaica's national dish: ackee and saltfish. The potential danger of the goods is heightened because ackee, if not picked or cooked properly is poisonous, and saltfish is inedible if not cooked properly. One would think the children/explorers were trying to kill Mr. Hamilton off! This reverse colonial reading seems to be a deliberate ploy of Smith's, as she playfully refers to the children as "colonizer[s]" (167). Smith's novel mocks Britain's fear of being colonized, however, because while the children play at being colonizers, it is just that – play. One of the children's favourite "games" is taxing: "The practice of 'taxing' something, whereby one lays claims, like a newly arrived colonizer, to items in a street that do not belong to you, was well known and beloved to both of them [the twins]" (167). Unlike the real colonizers, the children's claims to items that do not belong to them are strictly metaphoric, making the reverse colonization position completely without effect.

There are, however, other elements that might lead to the skewed reading of seeing Britain's position as that of the vanquished. One of the results of postcolonial theory is that a voice is given to the marginalized. The paradigm of colonialism (colonizer and colonized) created a situation in which there was much "silencing and marginalizing of the postcolonial voice by the imperial centre" (Ashcroft, et al. 83). But in *White Teeth*, the reader is provided with a new marginal figure to which postcolonial theory could be applied. The new marginal figure in post-war England, according to this reading, is the white, lower-class male, symbolized in the novel by Archie Jones. Archie, war veteran, flyer-folder, forgotten athlete, is desperately trying to be heard and seen. He is "living alone at the age of forty-seven, in a one-bedroom flat above a deserted chip shop" (4). As the novel opens, he is tired of being pushed aside and undervalued and is attempting to take his own life. Archie is aware of his invisibility: "*I'm here*, Archie felt like saying, *I'm right here you know, I'm bloody right here*" (10). Archie's suicide attempt can be read as a desire to be heard and seen.

Rather than being in a dominant position, the white male figure has switched identities with the colonial immigrant, in this case, his second wife, Clara. Traditionally, the Caribbean figure was said to be rootless, living in a liminal state, belonging neither in the Caribbean nor in England. Instead, Archie is the one who is described as being rootless: "At nights he looked out through the windscreen into the monstropolous sky and had the old realization of his universal proportions, feeling what it was to be tiny and rootless. He thought about the dent he might make on the world if he disappeared, and it seemed negligible, too small to calculate" (11). He appears to be the marginal figure and it is the Caribbean immigrant who now has roots and saves Archie/England. Clara continues to occupy the liminal position, but she is seen by Archie as being rooted. She gives him a new reason for living: "Clara was *from* somewhere. She had *roots*. More specifically, she was from Lambeth (via Jamaica)" (27). It is England, not the Caribbean, that is referred to as a "little island" (12). Contrary to a traditional view of history, England is no longer the one being emulated but must look to other "third world" nations for support, which raises the question of how England was affected by colonialism.

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's definition of postcolonialism, then, appears appropriately vague: "We use the term 'postcolonial,' however, to cover *all* the culture affected by the imperial process, from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2; emphasis mine). This definition, and Archie's position, could suggest that England was also affected negatively by colonialism and that there are some after-effects that are now being felt that would possibly put them in the position of the vanquished. It was not, however, these negative effects of colonization that Powell was referring to

in his 1968 speech. To him, and to some Brits of his time, this colonization in reverse seemed not metaphoric or ironic, but very real. Their looming minority status appeared to be a real threat to them: "In this country in 15 or 20 years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man" (Powell 4). If Powell and his constituents felt they were being colonized, how, then, is a colony defined? Samad says "one strong man and one weak is a colony" (92). Powell was evidently afraid of Britain and its culture being the weak man.

Alternatively, Smith has shown consistently in her novel that this position of Britain as vanquished does not work. For one, some of those doing the "colonizing" — such as Irie and the twins — are actually British-born citizens. This is not a foreign culture trying to swamp British values, but a new type of British values trying to gain some prominence. Second, at the moment, this new colonization does not contain any real power. Samad, Clara, their children, and the many immigrants of the novel are still largely marginalized and ambivalent about their position. Samad is struggling at a minimum wage job, living in a poor part of town, and sending his children to the local public school. There is no dominance there. Instead what we see are willing and unwilling examples of an intermingling of cultures, or hybridity. Miss Lou's ironic poem and Smith's humorous tone show that Powell's idea of England as the vanquished is untenable.

Reflecting their ambivalence, what the immigrants really want is not to be colonizers in turn, but to be included in Britain's definition of nationhood and a revised concept of Englishness. It is a desire for their still largely marginal voice to be heard and included in the country's self-definition. Samad is so desperate to be heard that he wants to wear a sign that says "I AM NOT A WAITER. I HAVE BEEN A STUDENT, A SCIENTIST, A SOLDIER" (Smith 58). What Samad wants to assert is his presence in the country and his viewpoint as part of the master narrative. As Connor suggests, what Samad would like is "an awareness of all the local histories that are silenced in the name of [...] universal accounts" (133). It is no longer acceptable for England to suppress minority positions.

There are signs, however, that the margins are being brought into the fold and this is partly illustrated through the hybridized language the second generation uses. In contemporary Britain, the younger generation reflects and speaks an intermingling of an odd assortment of cultures. Millat and his Raggastani crew are a good example: "Raggastanis spoke a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati and English" (231). Their ethos is a mixture of Islam, Kung Fu, and the Black Power movement and all the kids in the neighbourhood speak with a Jamaican accent (167). According to Iain Chambers, this intermingling of culture illustrates a re-interpretation of language and history: "History is harvested and collected, to be assembled, made to speak, re-membered, re-read and rewritten, and language comes alive in transit, in interpretation" (3). In the same way that Samad tries to change the meaning of *pandy*, the second generation is re-interpreting words, and as a result, history. The children have managed to invert the meaning of "chief." The word "'chief,' for some inexplicable reason hidden in the etymology of North London slang, meaning *fool, arse, wanker*, a loser of the most colossal proportions" (Smith 163). There is still some confusion, however, because now Samad is the one who is holding on to the traditional usage when he praises Magid as a "'natural *chief*" (216). In the same way that England holds on to its hegemony through control of language, by changing word usage, the younger generation is slowly changing concepts of Englishness.

The problem with hybridity is that although it is supposed to be a sign of a well-mixed society, it does not create an equality of cultures. One culture, in this instance British, still dominates. Hybridity proposes a utopia where all cultures can be equal. It is, however, more of an Orwellian equality. As Paul argues "in Labour's postwar imperialism, everyone was a British subject but some were more British than others" (22). This is illustrated through Samad's disbelief that the other members of the

regiment do not accept him as an equal: "'is it so impossible, that you and I, stuck in this British machine, could find it in ourselves to fight together as British subjects?'" (Smith 86). The answer, of course, is "no" because the hybrid mixture that Britain is becoming has not been conceived of in terms of equality.

Part of the reason this hybrid nation does not work is that all Smith's characters are either struggling to belong to, or exclude others from, imaginary constructs of the nation. There are some who might argue that Britain's boundaries are absolute and fixed. There is nothing imaginary about them; however, there are many in Argentina (and Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales) who disagree with Britain's construction of its boundaries. As Anderson argues, "nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind" (4). So many of the world's wars have been fought, and continue to be fought, over where nations' imaginary and actual boundaries lie.

It is not, however, just the "centre" that is guilty of imagining the nation. Members of the diasporic community are particularly prone to false memories of the homeland. In speaking about the diasporic figure, Salman Rushdie writes "that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (10). There is a strong desire to romanticize the homeland once one has left it. Samad is guilty of creating a Bangladesh that does not exist. He sends Magid home to get a religious, Eastern upbringing and keeps Millat in England because he has already been too corrupted by the West. The results were not what he was expecting: "'The one I send home comes out a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer. The one I keep here is fully paid-up green bow-tie-wearing fundamentalist terrorist'" (Smith 407). The Bangladesh that he imagines as the "East" should actually have been conceptualized as the "West," and the "West" is far more "Eastern" than he imagined. These crises of identity and displacement are the result of misidentified communities.

To return to the teeth metaphor, the concept of nation, the constructed entity (the dentures) no longer fit the physical space, the actual nation (the mouth). Most of the characters in *White Teeth* feel this displacement between the imagined community or nation and their place in it. Irie feels she is a "stranger in a stranger land" (266). Samad has lost his "bearings" (188). Clara describes her situation as one where "something is gained but something is lost" (45). This alienation does not mean that if one reconceptualizes the nation, one can then definitely refigure one's place in that nation. The current condition seems to be one of constant reconceptualizing and refiguring. As Anderson writes, "the nation presents itself as simultaneously open and closed" (146). The community member is thus forced to constantly renegotiate his or her place in a nation that is itself constantly undergoing transformation. This constant reconceptualizing might explain why dentists insist on refitting dentures every few years. The shape of the mouth changes. Eating habits are altered. It also explains the postmodern inability to concretely pin history down. One interpretation cannot accurately be said to be "truth" when everything is in flux. What Smith appears to be advocating is not the complete replacement of the old teeth with new, but a mixture of the two, some crowned, some filled, some rooted, others shaky. The book's hope is that the variety of teeth functions well, while at the same time creating a completely different bite.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* posits a revised version of history and Englishness, one where the various minority voices are included in reconceiving the nation. The future of Britain, it claims, is an extended version of the pub it mentions—O'Connell's pub, especially once the doors are opened to women. O'Connell's pub, with its distinctly Irish name is run by a Middle-Eastern man, frequented by people from all over the world. It offers a "different kind of family" (Smith 183). It is a place where

everything and nothing happens: "you could be without family in O'Connell's, without possessions or status, without past glory or future hope" (192). It is a place where all the patrons get their say, where nothing is known for certain, and where they somehow manage to get along. Here one is neither victor nor vanquished, but somewhere in between.

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