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# ZADIE SMITH AND MONICA ALI: ARRIVAL AND SETTLEMENT IN RECENT BRITISH FICTION

## INTRODUCTION: THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE AND NEW BRITISH WRITING

The thirteenth and final volume in the Oxford English Literary History covers the period 1948-2000 and is entitled *The Internationalization of English Literature*. This title refers not to the astonishing extent to which English Literature has become an international subject, studied in schools, colleges and universities all over the world, but to the way in which the very concept of what constitutes 'English' literature has been transformed. As Bruce King, the author of the volume puts it, during the post-war period "the literature of England went through a major change, a change in subject matter and sensitivities as historically significant as earlier shifts in sensibility given such names as Romanticism, Victorianism and Modernism" (King 2004: 1). This transformation has come about because of the arrival in Britain of successive waves of immigrants, largely from countries that were formerly part of the British Empire. Authors from these communities brought to English writing new contexts, new narratives, both personal and national, and a new sense of language and form. In the work of such writers as Monica Ali, Hanif Kureishi, Andrea Levey, Timothy Mo, Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith, readers have been confronted with texts that challenge them in unfamiliar ways, requiring them not only to adapt to new literary modes, but also to consider the experiences of distant countries and to understand and assess the part played by Britain in those countries' histories. The phenomenon has been described as 'The Empire Writes Back', a challenge to those writers, like Joyce Cary, Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster and Rudyard Kipling, whose accounts of the West's relationship with its imperial 'possessions' in Africa or the Far East are seen as repressive and univocal, allowing utterance to those who govern colonialism and silencing those who suffer it.

Immigration has been a central feature of the British experience in the years since the Second World War. Small immigrant communities had existed in the British Isles for a long time, largely concentrated in major cities, especially London, and around large ports such as Liverpool. These immigrants ranged from seamen

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and servants who had married local women and settled in Britain, to religious or political refugees, escaping persecution in their home countries. The latter included the French Protestant Huguenots, who arrived in England in the eighteenth century, and Jews from countries in central and eastern Europe who came in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was only in the years after 1945 that significant numbers of immigrants began to arrive from such locations as the West Indies, Africa and the Indian sub-continent. These immigrants differed from their predecessors in a number of ways. First, although they included groups of political refugees, many came not in flight but in search – of jobs, of education, of greater opportunities. Some, such as those who arrived from the West Indies in the 1940s, came also by invitation, responding to recruitment campaigns – by London Transport, for example, seeking staff for the capital’s bus and underground systems – in their own countries. Second, they were visibly different, marked out from the native population by the colour of their skins. And third, because they came from countries that were either part of the old British Empire or the new Commonwealth they could claim, if not in every case British citizenship, at least the right to regard Britain as in some sense a mother country.

Literary representations of the post-war immigrant experience began to appear in print in the 1950s, in the work of such writers as George Lamming, Sam Selvon and Nirad Chaudhuri.<sup>1</sup> Edward Said defines exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” and goes on to argue that “the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left for ever” (Said 2001: 173, 174), and for these early immigrant writers, the experience of displacement and exile to an often hostile environment is recent and raw.<sup>2</sup> As Bruce King points out, nostalgia for the life back home is common in these early immigrant writings, a hope that the place of exile will not become a permanent home and that one day a return will be possible to a more comfortable life in the country of origin. The second phase of immigrant writing, again following King’s formulation, concerns the building of a life based on new affiliations. These tend to be reconfigured versions of pre-existing affiliations – Caribbean, Asian or Black – that acquire a new significance and urgency in the circumstances of exile. A third phase, King argues, and one which is still in progress, consists of texts in which authors assert that their generation are part of British history and indeed now have a history of their own *in* Britain. Thus, the desire for myths of origin in the first generation and the search for a distinctive identity in the second, gives way in the third phase to narratives of belonging. Bruce King sums up this historical progression as follows: “the writing evolves from stories of immigration to the later assertion of black Britishness and such stages on the way as the black rebel, black consciousness and gender issues” (King 2004: 8).

Of course the pattern is not entirely clear-cut or straightforward and the characteristic subject-matters and thematic concerns of each phase are not necessarily completely supplanted by those of the next generation of writers. Indeed, such material is often gathered up, refashioned and reinterpreted in ways that acknowledge the dynamic nature of the British immigrant experience. Writing in the third phase, particularly, is marked by problematic, troubled and disrupted narratives that employ non-linear chronologies, contested events and unreliable or unstable points

of view. These texts tend to be dialogic and polyvocal and to incorporate a variety of discourses, dialects and idiolects both for reasons of verisimilitude and to undermine dominant linguistic forms. Both the novels discussed in this article belong to this most recent phase of immigrant writing and display elements of its complexity of structure and diversity of language and point of view.

## ZADIE SMITH AND MONICA ALI: THE NOVELS AND THEIR AUTHORS

Zadie Smith and Monica Ali represent different aspects of the British immigrant experience since the Second World War. Zadie Smith, who was born in North London in 1975 to an English father and Jamaican mother, emerges from the first phase of post-war immigrations from the West Indies. Monica Ali, born in Bangladesh in 1967, is also of mixed parentage, English and Bangladeshi, and moved to Bolton in the north-west of England when she was three years old. Both authors studied at university: Smith read English at Cambridge, Ali, Philosophy, Politics and Economic at Oxford. Ali now lives in south London and Smith, after spending some time as a visiting lecturer at Harvard University, still lives in north London.

Both Monica Ali and Zadie Smith were seen by the media and the cultural establishment as literary prodigies. Zadie Smith began work on *White Teeth* at the age of 21, while she was still a student at Cambridge, and in 1997 was reported to have received a huge advance for the novel on the basis of a partially completed manuscript.<sup>3</sup> *Brick Lane* was still awaiting publication when in 2003 the literary periodical *Granta* named Monica Ali as one of twenty 'Best of Young English Novelists'—a list on which Zadie Smith also appeared.<sup>4</sup> Both novels won or were nominated for a number of leading literary prizes. *White Teeth*'s successes included the Guardian First Book Award, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the Whitbread First Novel Award, a Commonwealth Writers Prize and the W. H. Smith Award for best new talent. It was nominated for the Orange Prize, which is for women writers only, and there was widespread surprise that it was not on the short list for the Man Booker Prize, generally regarded as the most prestigious of the fiction awards.<sup>5</sup> Monica Ali was named the British Book Awards Newcomer of the Year and *Brick Lane* won the W. H. Smith People's Choice Award, as well as being short listed for the Guardian First Book Award, the British Book Awards Literary Fiction Award and the Man Booker Prize.<sup>6</sup> In the context of contemporary British fiction such awards are regarded as extremely significant in helping to establish a young writer's career: they always lead to enhanced publicity and promotion by publishers and booksellers, increased sales and invitations to give readings, attend literary festivals or to undertake short-term residencies.<sup>7</sup>

*White Teeth* and *Brick Lane* also attracted further attention—or notoriety—as a result of adaptations for other media. *White Teeth* was successfully adapted for television in the autumn of 2004, but in 2006, when a feature film of *Brick Lane* was in production, attempts to film on location were frustrated by the protests of local residents, who were unhappy at the representation of the Bangladeshi community in the novel.<sup>8</sup> Such reactions, both positive and negative, are indicative of the extent to which both books in some way responded to the contemporary mood in Britain.

Anxiety about levels of immigration, accompanying discussions of national identity and a particular disquiet, following the bombings in New York on 11 September 2001 and London on 7 July 2005, about the presence of supposed Islamic extremists in western societies, have led to a heightened interest in novels addressing aspects of the immigrant experience and interracial tensions.

ZADIE SMITH, *WHITE TEETH*

*White Teeth*, which was published in 2000, is a novel conceived on a Dickensian scale, and is a busy and clamorous text in which several points of view jostle for the reader's attention. Two characters, Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, who meet as young men in the final days of the Second World War, lie at the centre of its action, but the novel reaches out to encompass the lives of their families and a wide range of major and minor characters. Chronologically, too, its scope is ambitious. The central narrative moves across a quarter of a century, with major parts of the action taking place in 1974, 1984, 1990, 1992 and 1999. But it also moves backwards to 1945, 1857 and 1907 to visit events in the lives of the main characters and their ancestors. It conceives of the immigrant experience on a wide historical and geographical scale and includes characters who are third generation Jewish immigrants from Poland, first generation from Bangladesh and second generation from Jamaica. The novel delights in mixtures and combinations. Interracial and inter-religious sexual relationships and marriages are to be found throughout the novel: Afro-Caribbean and Bangladeshi with white English, Afro-Caribbean with Bangladeshi, Catholic with Jew. O'Connell's Irish Pool House is run by Arabs; Archie Jones, once an Olympic-grade track cyclist, corresponds regularly with a Swedish former opponent and was once married to an Italian woman. Genetic mixture is a major theme of the novel, which ultimately describes a complex web of interconnection of locations, families and friendships, always branching off, like a Darwinian tree, in new directions.

Smith herself has commented on her interest in "ideas and themes that I can tie together – problem-solving from other places and worlds", and goes on to say that it is not the novelist's job "to tell us how somebody felt about something, it's to tell us how the world works" (Wood 2004: 175). In quoting these remarks, James Wood identifies a concern with connection as an obsession of the ambitious contemporary novel, as practised by Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith in Britain and Don de Lillo or Thomas Pynchon in the United States. The grammar of such fiction, Wood argues, is story-telling itself and its events and objects, of which there are a bewildering number, function as "props of the imagination, meaning's toys" (169). So voracious is this appetite for connection that the novels' plots place a strain on their readers' capacity for the suspension of disbelief, and this excess of story-telling conceals the fact that the connections are, in Wood's phrase, "conceptual rather than human" (171), a matter of mind over feeling, and may serve almost as a curtain to conceal a lack of human intensity. As a result of its scope and comprehensiveness, Smith's novel is, Woods asserts, "all shiny externality, a caricature" (172).

Wood's judgement is both severe and persuasive. The experience of reading *White Teeth* is very demanding. The novel requires the reader to make constant

readjustments to new places, dates and points of view, and is full of incidental detail that may be engaging on a local level but whose relation to the book's overall concerns is either unclear or too studied and overt. Yet, as I have already suggested, instability of narrative structure is a feature of recent immigrant writing, and its function is to disrupt the reader's sense of fictional decorum, to enable texts to describe unanticipated trajectories and to tell stories whose outcomes are both varied and unpredictable. Furthermore, Smith's extraordinary linguistic virtuosity, her capacity to catch the rhythms and vocabulary of a variety of speech registers, from intellectual middle-class English to the dialects of Jamaica and Bangladesh and a number of forms of hybridised speech, some of them very recent developments in spoken English, although demanding attentiveness from readers is one of the novel's most impressive features. These speech registers are used for a variety of purposes, sympathetically, satirically and for verisimilitude. They include, for instance, the comic snatches of dialogue between Denzel and Clarence, domino-playing Jamaican habitués of O'Connell's Pool Bar:

'What dat bambaclaat say?'  
'Im say *evenin*'?  
'Can't 'im see me playin' domino?'  
'No man! 'Im 'ave a pussy for a face. How you expect 'im to see any little ting?' (Smith 2000: 187)

There is also the patois of politicized Asian youths reacting to the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in 1988:

'It's a fucking insult!' said Millat, spitting some gum against the window.  
'We've taken it too long in this country. And now we're getting it from our own, man. Rhas clut! He's a fucking bador, white man's puppet.' [...]  
'You read it?' asked Ranil, as they whizzed past Finsbury Park.  
There was a general pause.  
Millat said, 'I haven't exactly read it exactly- but I know all about that shit, yeah?' (Smith 2000: 233)

In both cases, Smith makes no concessions to the limitations of her readers' understanding – the novel contains no glossary – but allows the rhythm and context of the dialogue to make its own effect. These passages illustrate the strengths of Smith's writing: her eye is very sharp and her ear very acute and she constantly shows imaginative ambition in creating scenes between different pairs and groups of characters.

Smith is also adept in the use of free indirect discourse, often moving rapidly between the consciousnesses of two or more of her characters. At the same time, however, she claims all the privileges available to the omniscient narrator. As I shall argue later in this article, Monica Ali's practice is in this respect very different. Ali is extremely self-effacing and although her narrative stance is third-person, her subtle use of free indirect discourse is such that there is hardly a passage in the novel that is not somehow infused with the feelings of one or other of the characters, and

extended narrative commentary is virtually non-existent. But where Ali proceeds through action and reaction, Smith is more inclined to do so through direct intervention. A good example can be found in the passage immediately following the dialogue between Millat and his friends quoted in the previous paragraph:

To be more precise, Millat hadn't read it. Millat knew nothing about the writer, nothing about the book; could not identify the book if it lay in a pile of other books, could not pick out the writer in a line-up of other writers (irresistible, this line-up of offending writers: Socrates, Protagoras, Ovid and Juvenal, Radclyffe Hall, Pasternak, Solzhenitsyn, Nabokov, D. H. Lawrence, all holding up their numbers for the mug shot, squinting in the flashbulb). (Smith 2000: 233)

This moves decisively beyond Millat's consciousness and knowledge and the only person for whom the line-up of censored writers is "irresistible" is Zadie Smith herself, who cannot forbear from turning the imagined identity parade into a parade of her own knowledge. Such excursions, which occur quite frequently in the novel, can be very irritating, especially when, as in this case, the passage continues in a manner that focuses on how, even in his ignorance of the text, the publication of Rushdie's novel might have an impact on a disaffected young Muslim:

But he knew other things. He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki, no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the 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. (Smith 2000: 233-4)

This passage is worth quoting at length because it shows how Smith makes use of rhetoric. The prose incorporates a parade of racial ignorance and prejudice, a series of characterisations of whose existence Millat is painfully conscious but that he refuses to accept or internalise. The passage also contributes to one of the novel's key themes: the difficulty that immigrants have in articulating their feelings and in finding a narrative, a meaningful sequence of events in which they can participate free of the stereotypes imposed upon them by the dominant culture.

Elsewhere in the novel, there are extended narrative passages about such matters as the history of immigration, genetic research or the Indian Mutiny of 1857. There are also quotations from the minutes of parent-governor meetings, books on gardening written by one of the characters, an historical account of the events of 1857 and a text on business principles in the catering industry. The

narrative cannot resist displaying its knowledge of contemporary culture, through the use of brand-names, references to pop music, topographical detail and public events. Narrative comment and incidental detail have always been part of the novelist's range of techniques, but there is a sense in *White Teeth* that they are often used for their own sake, because the author is anxious to prove her ability to bring off certain effects. James Wood writes of the frequent "announcements on the authorial Tannoy" (Wood 2004: 178), and it is true that the narrative cannot run for very long without some reminder of the author's presence in the text. Even the humorous tone can become wearisome and at times descend into caricature and stereotype. Denzel and Clarence's snatches of dialogue are amusing as occasional spicings of the narrative, but when they are repeated they begin to seem unnecessary elaborations of the novel's texture, valueless exercises in virtuosity.

At the same time, however, it is important to commend Smith's novel for the way in which it brought to a wide readership a sense of the real complexity and variety of contemporary British society. The limitations of its vision are no different from that of any other novel of the period – and no work of fiction can be expected to be wholly inclusive. The third family to play a major part in the novel are the Chalfens, a highly intellectual middle-class family, with a lapsed Roman Catholic mother and a Jewish father. To the children of Archie and Samad, Irie and Millat, the Chalfen household represents an intensely desirable kind of English life, and both are irresistibly drawn towards the family and the glimpse it offers them of a different world from that of their parents. But the Chalfens, as well as being objects of desire for Irie and Millat, are also a target of the novel's satire. They are clannish and complacent about their *bien-pensant* [right-thinking] credentials, self-congratulatory about their rituals, private jokes and family language and very sure of what constitutes a 'Chalfen' person or 'Chalfen' behaviour. In this scene Smith very effectively allows the reader to see both the allure and the limitations of the Chalfens, as Irie joins them for tea:

[...] Irie wasn't embarrassed; she was fascinated, enamoured after five minutes. No one in the Jones household made jokes about Darwin, or said 'my foot and my mouth are on intimate terms', or offered choices of tea, or let speech flow freely from adult to child, child to adult, as if the channel of communications between these two tribes was untrammelled, unblocked by history, *free*.

'Well,' said Joyce [Chalfen] [...] '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.'

All the Chalfens milling through the kitchen, Marcus, Josh, Benjamin, Jack, exploded into laughter. Joyce immediately followed suit. (Smith 2000: 319)

The exchange neatly exposes Joyce as the Chalfen who is most insensitive to the realities of multi-racial Britain, and to the different sense of origins and belonging experienced by second and third-generation immigrants. Jamaica is not 'home' to Irie, any more than Bangladesh is to Millat: they belong in the place they know and are known.

The novel's sense of connectedness, as it traces the different characters' sense of their roots, enables Smith to confront important issues about cultural and ethnic identity, as in this exchange between Samad and Irie Jones, daughter of Archie and his mixed-race second wife, Clara Howden:

'I sometimes wonder why I bother,' said Samad bitterly, betraying the English inflections of twenty years in the country, 'I really do. These days, it feels to me like you make a devil's pact when you walk into this country [...] – who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcomes, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house-trained. Who would want to stay? But you have made a devil's pact ... it drags you in and suddenly you are unable to return, your children an unrecognizable, you belong nowhere [...] And then you begin to give up the very *idea* of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this *belonging*, it seems like some long dirty lie ... and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an *accident*. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?'

As Samad described this dystopia with a look of horror, Irie was ashamed to find that the land of accidents sounded like *paradise* to her. Sounded like freedom. (Smith 2000: 407-8)

This exchange, taking place as it does across racial and generational boundaries, stays close to the experience of the characters involved and is the stronger for it. Without narratorial intervention it defines very precisely the difference in attitude between the first and third generation immigrant, between Samad, who still hopes to cling to old values and be true to his cultural origins, and Irie, who wants to free herself from what in a later scene she refers to as "[...] this endless maze of present rooms and past rooms and the things said in them years ago and everybody's old historical shit all over the place" (Smith 2000: 514).

#### MONICA ALI, *BRICK LANE*

*Brick Lane*, which appeared in 2004, takes its title from a well-known street in the East End of London. Writing about this location in his review of the novel, Sukhdev Sandhu says

Brick Lane has always been a holding area, a temporary interzone for immigrants who have not yet settled; whose lives are defined by the past – their own or that of their parents – but who wish to seize the future; who wish to become the consumers rather than hunch-backed toilers. It's a slow



and incomplete journey as far as many Bangladeshis are concerned. The canny ones, those with contacts or who strike it lucky with property or businesses, move away ... The others aren't going anywhere fast, no matter how gentrified the area. (Sandhu 2003b)

In the course of Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* takes on a number of representative or symbolic functions. It is a topographical location, a place where Nazneen, the novel's main character, does not actually live, but which she visits regularly and where she reads the signs of a gradually developing Bangladeshi immigrant culture. The street represents, as Sandhu suggests, a kind of cultural condition arising from a particular historical moment; or rather from a series of such moments, as the East End has received successive waves of immigrants, fleeing religious persecution or grinding poverty. This history finds its physical form in a building that stands on the corner of Brick Lane and Fournier Street and which has been successively a French Huguenot Church, a Methodist Chapel, a synagogue and a mosque.<sup>9</sup> Brick Lane is indeed, in Sandhu's terms "a holding area, a temporary interzone", a liminal space where for some the threshold becomes a boundary: the door is never opened, the next step never taken. Brick Lane then becomes a condition of mind, a situation from which it seems there is no escape and which is potentially damaging both to individuals and to communities.

The novel tells the story of Nazneen's life from her birth in Bangladesh in 1967, to her arrival in the East End of London in 1985, in order to marry Chanu, a much older man who has been in England for some time, and then to the novel's conclusion in March 2002. When the novel opens Chanu, who claims to have a degree in English Literature from Dhaka University, is a local government clerk. Disappointed in his hopes of promotion, he later leaves this job and works as a taxi driver. Nazneen spends much of her time in their council flat in east London and only very slowly begins to acquire some knowledge of English culture and the English language. Their first child, a boy, dies when he is very young, but they later have two daughters. The central event of Nazneen's life, however, lies in her passionate and transgressive relationship with Karim, a young Bangladeshi whom she meets when he delivers batches of garments for her to work on at home. Chanu, meanwhile, becomes increasingly disillusioned with England and more fearful of the erosion of the beliefs and values of his home country. His claims to educational attainment, embodied in his miscellaneous collection of framed 'qualifications', seem more and more irrelevant, and he eventually decides to reject the country that has promised so much and given so little and return to Bangladesh. Nazneen also regrets the loss of her homeland, but she is more able to commit herself to England, where her daughters have acquired a British Asian identity and where she realises that there will be more opportunities for her to develop an independent life. When Chanu returns to Bangladesh, Nazneen and her daughters do not accompany him: to do so would be to take a backwards step.

This largely unilinear narrative is frequently interrupted by Nazneen's memories of her early life, and by letters from her sister Hasina, who has remained in Bangladesh. These letters describe a story of decline, as Hasina, who runs away from home with her lover at the age of sixteen, slips slowly down the social

scale: she works in a factory, as a prostitute and as a servant to rich westernized Bangladeshis. These letters not only keep Nazneen in touch with her country of origin but also inform the reader about changing conditions in Bangladesh. Also, in the light of Nazneen's own secret and transgressive relationship with Karim, Hasina's experiences constitute a counter-narrative to the main story, one which might be pointing out the consequences of such powerful and dangerous feelings. The moral lesson, if one is intended, is not insisted on, however, and the letters are allowed to speak for themselves and are presented to the reader largely without specific comment from Nazneen or mediation from the narrative voice.

As a function of its concentration on Nazneen as the focalising consciousness of the novel, *Brick Lane* is a strongly feminised text. As in the novels of Jane Austen, men are never seen except in the presence of women, either in Chanu and Nazneen's home setting or when she goes elsewhere – the doctor's surgery or a political meeting. We have no idea, other than his own account, of what happens in Chanu's workplaces, or when Karim meets his employer, or what Chanu and his friend Dr Azad may have to say to each other when they are alone. Women together, however, feature strongly in the novel, in Nazneen's childhood memories, in her friendship with Razia, and in her encounters with Mrs Islam, an older Bangladeshi woman. These two characters represent different ways of being a Muslim woman in England. Mrs Islam attempts to recreate village structures and to exert the same kind of power as she might enjoy in Bangladesh, exploiting the vulnerability of Bangladeshi immigrants in her role as a moneylender. Razia is more adaptable to her new circumstances, symbolised by her clothing, which combines traditional Bangladeshi dress with a Union Jack sweatshirt. Both Razia and Nazneen also bear the consequences of the conflicts that emerge in the next immigrant generation: Razia's son becomes a drug addict, while Nazneen's elder daughter, Shahana, briefly runs away from home rather than be taken to Bangladesh by her father.

The other main consequence of this concentration on Nazneen is that the novel takes place almost entirely within the Bangladeshi community. White people exist at a distance: seen, commented on, but never encountered. Nazneen waves to a tattooed woman on the balcony of an opposite flat; a couple is heard making love in the flat next door; customers are glimpsed through the windows of shops and restaurants. Nazneen moves among them as if part of a separate and quite different world, regarding them as objects of interest and amazement:

She stared at the long, thin faces, the pointy chins. The women had strange hair. It puffed up around their heads, pumped up like a snake's hood [...] A woman in a long red coat stopped and took a note book from her bag. She consulted the pages. The coat was the colour of a bride's sari. It was long and heavy with gold buttons that matched the chain on her bag. Her shiny black shoes had big gold buckles. Her clothes were rich. Solid. They were armour, and her ringed fingers weapons. Nazneen pulled at her cardigan. She was cold. Her fingertips burned with cold. The woman looked up and saw Nazneen staring. She smiled, like she was smiling at someone who had tried and totally failed to grasp the situation. (Ali 2003: 57)

Ali's control of the narrative is here surrendered to Nazneen by means of her accomplished use of free indirect discourse, so as to allow the reader to share the character's direct observations rather than the narrator's explanatory commentary. Smith might use this incident as an opportunity for a reflection on the hurry and acquisitiveness of contemporary British society or on the extent to which immigrants are often invisible to the native population. Ali, however, is prepared to allow Nazneen's observations to perform their own work – the simile of the snake's hood, drawn from Nazneen's childhood; the woman's absorption in what needs to be done; her protective-aggressive clothing and appearance; culminating in her gaze at Nazneen, when the language – "totally failed to grasp the situation" – subtly shifts from Nazneen's register into that of the woman herself.

Throughout the novel Monica Ali makes highly effective use of Nazneen's 'innocent eye' as she begins to learn about British society. But the educative function cuts both ways: if *Brick Lane* is valuable in informing its readers about Bangladeshi life in Britain, it is also comments on the nature and quality of British life and its attitude towards immigrant communities. Chanu's inability to establish himself in a secure career is no doubt partly to do with his overestimation of his educational attainments, but it also says something about the real social barriers constraining many members of immigrant communities. But the commentary on British society is not simply concerned with such political issues – it operates with equal force when it is directed at those experiences that an English reader may take for granted but which Nazneen sees as extraordinary and wondrous:

A man in a very tight suit (so tight that it made his private parts stand out in display) and a woman in a skirt that did not even cover her bottom gripped each other as an invisible force hurtled them across an oval arena [...] Every move they made was urgent, intense, a declaration. The woman raised one leg and rested her boot (Nazneen saw the thin blade for the first time) on the other thigh, making a triangular flag of her legs and spun around until she would surely fall but didn't. She did not slow down. She stopped and flung her arms above her head with a look so triumphant that you knew she had conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her. (Ali 2003: 36)

This is a classic piece of what the Russian formalist critics called 'defamiliarisation', the technique of making strange what is familiar and known.<sup>10</sup> The emphasis in such writing is on perception and description rather than on names and concepts that are already known to the observer and the reader. This account of a couple ice-skating emphasises Nazneen's observation of their performance and her developing understanding of what is taking place.<sup>11</sup> Her reactions move from judgmental comments on the skaters' revealing costumes, through wonder ("an invisible force") to an attempt to extract a meaningful narrative from the dancer's movements. When Nazneen asks Chanu what this

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 strange activity is called, his terse reply ("Ice-skating") confirms the impression made by the passage. Definitions are hardly relevant when an individual reacts so powerfully and directly to experience; and Ali's readers are also implicated in that we are required to exercise powers of observation and perception and to see a familiar activity in a new light.

Such considerations emerge from the narrative rather than being insisted upon by the narrator and Ali's tact and reticence indicates her respect for the integrity and dignity of her characters. She certainly explores for comic purposes the gap between the characters' knowledge and comprehension and those of the reader, but her aim is not to mock the characters, but to increase understanding and to draw attention to the complexities of their situation. Most readers are likely to understand the true nature of Chanu's framed qualifications – which include a letter from a college explaining where it is located – but Ali is not seeking easy humour at his expense, not least because he has some insight into his own situation. Her tone remains restrained and measured, rising in intensity only when the events of the novel require it to do so, and her self-effacement is a major literary and moral achievement, resulting in a novel that is all the more powerful: comic, tragic, tender and passionate by turns. As James Woods remarks, Monica Ali's storytelling is of "the kind that proceeds illuminatingly in units of characters rather than in wattage of 'style'" (Wood 2004: 233).

### CONCLUSIONS

Both novels end on a note of muted optimism. In *White Teeth*, the final scene brings together all the principal characters at a public meeting to launch the career of a supermouse, genetically engineered by Marcus Chalfen. Irie, Archie Jones's daughter, is pregnant with a child whose father may be either Millat or Magid Iqbal – she makes love with both brothers on the same afternoon. Archie is confronted again with the man that Samad ordered him to shoot in 1945 but whom he allowed to escape, and once again saves his life. In the confusion, the supermouse escapes with Archie's encouragement: "Go on my son! thought Archie" (Smith 2000: 542). These, the novel's final words, suggest that the narrative has described a trajectory of liberation and assimilation. Just as Irie rejects "everybody's old historical shit" (514), so the mouse is able to elude a destiny imposed upon it by interfering humanity. This is not to say that the novel ties up all its loose ends: there are inevitably a number of unresolved stories, because Monica Ali knows that in the third and fourth generations, the generations of Magid and Millat and Irie and their child, new immigrant narratives will emerge, in which new challenges and opportunities will have to be faced.

The end of *Brick Lane*, characteristically, is conceived on a less dramatic scale. Chanu's return to Bangladesh may seem to be a defeat, an acknowledgment that his attempt to build a new life in England has failed. But in other senses it represents a positive move, a recognition by Chanu of his real identity and his true priorities, while in terms of his relationship with Nazneen there is a sense that each is allowing the other the freedom to make their own choices, without anger or reprimand.

You're coming with me, then? You'll come?'  
 'No,' she breathed. She lifted his head and looked into his face. It was dented and swollen, almost out of recognition. 'I can't go with you,' she said.  
 'I can't stay,' said Chanu, and they clung to each other inside a sadness that went beyond words and tears, beyond that place, those causes and consequences, and became a part of their breath, their marrow, to travel with them now to wherever they went. (Ali 2003: 478)

Nazneen joins Razia in a collective of women garment workers, running their own business and acquiring a new independence. This liberation, offered to them by the opportunities of life in England, is symbolised at the very end of the book, when Razia and Nazneen's daughters arrange a surprise visit to an ice-skating rink, where Nazneen will have the chance to move like the couple she watched on television, seventeen years earlier:

She said, 'But you can't skate in a sari.'  
 Razia was already lacing her boots. 'This is England,' she said. 'You can do whatever you like.' (Ali 2003: 492)

For some critics, both novels place too much stress on personal experience at the expense of an exploration of the wider context in which their novels take place. Sukhdev Sandhu, for instance, comments on Ali's apparent deafness and blindness to the issues affecting both national and global politics, particularly in the confrontation between Islamic values and those of the West (Sandhu 2003b). Such political events as are mentioned in Ali's novel – riots in the north of England following the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, the events of 9/11 on a television screen or the stabbing of an Asian youth in London – occur offstage and seem distant and unrelated to the lives of Nazneen and their family. In the case of *White Teeth*, racial issues are addressed more directly, in the reactions of Archie's work colleagues when they discover that he has married a black woman and in Millat's rather ill-informed engagement in the protests about *The Satanic Verses*. In each novel a young man becomes politicised as a new kind of Muslim identity begins to emerge in reaction to British values, but the comic and sceptical representations of the organisations through which they operate – KEVIN in *White Teeth* and the Bengal Tigers in *Brick Lane* – could be seen as failures to confront the real seriousness of British racial politics. Karim's new-found loyalties are more seriously conceived than Millat's – Smith always finds it difficult to resist the comic potential of a character or situation – and his return to Bangladesh may well be for more sinister purposes than Chanu's. That the novel does not pursue this potential development is characteristic of Ali's method; any more than, for all her Dickensian affinities, Smith is willing to speculate about her characters' future destinies.

Criticisms such as Sandhu's could be answered in a number of ways. The first is to say that most public events are experienced by most members of the public through television, newspapers and hearsay; and on grounds of verisimilitude, Ali's decision to focalise the narrative through Nazneen would preclude any comprehensive account of such issues. But fiction can address political issues in many

different ways, and the perceptions of an uninformed and only partly comprehending consciousness like Nazneen's can produce their own kind of revelations. As a result of her relationship with Karim, Nazneen attends meetings of the Bengal Tigers, where her acute observation of the body language and manner of speech evinced by the various members of the group effectively reveals the strengths and limitations of their aspirations and activities. Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that the personal is the political, and that actions taking place in the domestic and local realm may have their consequences in a larger arena. In Ali's more monocultural narrative Nazneen's association with other Bangladeshi woman represents an important step in cultural and community as well as personal terms, while Smith dramatises the emergence of new social patterns arising from the multiplication of intercultural alliances. Indeed, in the spirit of their nineteenth-century predecessors, whose fictional territory they have in many respects reoccupied, both Smith and Ali seek resolutions in a change of heart rather than in social reform or political agreements.

\* \* \*

Inglan is a bitch  
dere's no escapin' it  
Inglan is a bitch  
dere's no runnin' whey from it.

(Linton Kwesi Johnson 'Inglan is a Bitch',  
Armitage and Crawford 1991: 353)

Since both novels were published, national and global tension has intensified. President Bush's declaration of a 'war on terrorism' following the 9/11 attacks in America has brought Muslim and western values into direct confrontation. The invasion of Iraq by British and American forces in March 2003, the war that followed and the continued violence and unrest in that country, has further heightened the hostility and has had a profound effect on Britain's international standing. Closer to home, a series of events has focused attention on 'the enemy within': the bombings in London on 7 July 2005, the failed suicide attacks, again in London, of 21 July 2005 and the attempted bombings in London and Glasgow on 29 and 30 June 2007 have made it clear that Muslim radicals, some of them born in Britain, regard civilians as legitimate targets. Meanwhile, there is conflict within the Muslim world. This is most evident in the battles between Sunni and Shias in Iraq, but also in Pakistan where only a week before these words were written fundamentalist Muslims were besieged in the Red Mosque in Islamabad, a confrontation that ended bloodily when government troops stormed the mosque. In these circumstances, it might be difficult now for Smith and Ali to write their novels in quite the same way, and it is notable that both writers have moved in very different directions in their subsequent fictions. Already, it is possible to hear a new note in British immigrant fiction, a note struck, for instance, in the aggressive and linguistically uncompromising opening words of *Londonstani* (2006), by Gautam Malkani, which is narrated by Jas, a nineteen-year old Asian youth

-- Serve him right he got his muthafuckin face fuck'd, shudnt b callin me a Paki, innit.

After spittin his words out Hardjit stopped for a second, like he expected us to write em down or someshit. Then he sticks in an exclamation mark by kickin the white kid in the face again. – Shudn't be callin us Pakis, innit, u dirty gora. (Malkani 2006: 3)

Jas is responding to the insults of a society that has both received and rejected him: the England that immigrants in earlier generations might have regarded as a mother country has now become, in the words of Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'a bitch'.<sup>12</sup> And from that bitch mother, new narratives of immigration, assimilation and rejection will no doubt emerge.

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1 Relevant titles include George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Nirad Chaudhuri's *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) and *A Passage to England* (1959).

2 The scale and speed of immigration in the decades after 1945 led to a good deal of social concern and unrest. Race riots took place in both London and Nottingham in 1958 and there was, and continues to be, widespread anxiety about issues such as housing, education, access to health and social services and the threatened dilution of British culture and identity.

3 See the Wikipedia entry on Zadie Smith at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zadie\\_Smith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zadie_Smith).

4 *Granta* has run similar promotions every ten years since 1983 and has proved extremely adept at identifying young writers who went on to produce work that has been regarded as highly significant within the field of British fiction.

5 Smith's second novel *The Autograph Man* (2002) was again short listed for the Orange Prize, while her third novel *On Beauty* (2005) won the Orange Prize and the Somerset Maugham Award and was short listed for the Man Booker Prize.

6 Monica Ali's second novel, *Alentejo Blue*, was published in 2006. It takes an entirely new direction, in both style and subject matter and has not so far attracted anything like the same amount of attention as *Brick Lane*.

7 Zadie Smith, for example, as well as becoming Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University, was writer in Residence at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts.

8 In a troubling echo of the controversy surrounding the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, members of the Bangladeshi community threatened to burn copies of Ali's book, but the demonstration held on 30 July 2006 was peaceful. Germaine Greer has lent her support to the protesters, but Salman Rushdie has spoken in Ali's defence. Further details of the controversy may be found in the *Wikipedia* entry on Monica Ali at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monica\\_Ali](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monica_Ali).

9 See Ackroyd (2000: 672).

10 The term (in Russian *ostranenie*) was coined by Viktor Shklovsky, especially in his work *Art as Technique* (1917).

11 This incident, which probably takes place in 1985, also exhibits truth to historical fact. The British ice-skating pair, Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean, enjoyed their greatest competitive success at the 1984 Winter Olympics, after which they became professional performers. Their celebrity and their famous routine performed to the music of Ravel's *Bolero* considerably raised the profile of ice-skating, which was frequently shown on British television during the 1980s.

12 The idea of Britain as the mother country is explored in Andrea Levey's novel *Small Island* (2004).

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## SUMMARY

### ZADIE SMITH AND MONICA ALI: ARRIVAL AND SETTLEMENT IN RECENT BRITISH FICTION

The arrival and settlement in Britain since 1945 of new immigrant communities has introduced fresh themes, formal structures and narrative subjects into British fiction. Many of these novels, written by second and third generation immigrants, concern the process of departure, transition and adjustment arising from the experience of coming to a new country. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* are two such novels, representing different aspects of the immigrant experience, the first from the Caribbean and the second from Bangladesh. Their narrative modes and points of view are very different and demonstrate contrasting approaches to the representation of change and the challenges, tensions and complexities of Britain rapidly-changing multicultural society.



**KEYWORDS:** contemporary British fiction, postcolonial fiction, contemporary British women writers, British immigrant fiction.

#### BRIEF CV

**Peter Preston** retired in 2005 as Director of the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Nottingham, where he is now Special Lecturer in English Studies and Academic Consultant to the D. H. Lawrence Research Centre, which he founded in 1991. Most of his research and publication has focused on the life and work of D. H. Lawrence. His *D. H. Lawrence Chronology* was published in 1994 and he wrote the introduction for the Penguin edition of *Mr Noon*, as well as editing three other Lawrence texts for Italian publishers while his essays on Lawrence have been published in books and journals in several countries. He has also published essays on and critical editions of Arnold Bennett, Elizabeth Gaskell, Katherine Mansfield and William Morris, and has edited several volumes of critical essays on subjects ranging from the literature of place to the work of Raymond Williams. He has just completed an on-line study guide to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and his current projects include a critical edition of William Morris's *A Dream of John Ball* and a book on the presence of Lawrence in British writing. In retirement, he is studying for an undergraduate qualification in Art History.