

## overSEAS 2019

This thesis was submitted by its author to the School of English and American Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts. It was found to be among the best theses submitted in 2019, therefore it was decorated with the School's Outstanding Thesis Award. As such it is published in the form it was submitted in **overSEAS 2019** (<http://seas3.elte.hu/overseas/2019.html>)

**DIPLOMAMUNKA**  
**MA THESIS**

Terbócs Imola Dalma  
Anglisztika MA  
Angol irodalom

2019

EÖTVÖS LORÁND TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM  
Bölcsészettudományi Kar

# MA DIPLOMAMUNKA

## MA THESIS

Multikulturális London: Bevándorló identitások Zadie Smith:  
*White Teeth* és Andrea Levy: *Small Island* című regényében

Multicultural London: Migrant Identities in Zadie Smith's  
*White Teeth* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

**Témavezető:**  
Dr. Friedrich Judit  
Egyetemi docens

**Készítette:**  
Terbócs Imola Dalma  
Anglisztika MA  
Angol irodalom

2019

## CERTIFICATE OF RESEARCH

By my signature below, I certify that my ELTE MA thesis, entitled “Multicultural London: Migrant Identities in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Andrea Levy’s *Small Island*” is entirely the result of my own work, and that no degree has previously been conferred upon me for this work. In my thesis I have cited all the sources (printed, electronic or oral) I have used faithfully and have always indicated their origin. The electronic version of my thesis (in PDF format) is a true representation (identical copy) of this printed version. If this pledge is found to be false, I realize that I will be subject to penalties up to and including the forfeiture of the degree earned by my thesis.

Date: .....

Signature: .....

## **Abstract**

This paper analyses questions of identity and belonging in two contemporary novels, Andrea Levy's *Small Island* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, from a post-colonial perspective, focusing on the experiences of coloured Commonwealth immigrants in Britain. After providing a brief overview of the theoretical and historical context of the analysis, the thesis moves on to examining the major social factors related to race which influence the coloured characters' identity construction and sense of belonging. The comparison of the struggles of different generations demonstrates the persistence of white British society's tendency towards binary thinking and racial othering, preventing even those coloured citizens from integration who were born and raised in Britain. Both novels call for a new understanding of national identity that looks beyond binary thinking and embraces the unique and individual hybridity of each citizen.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
1 Historical and Theoretical Background.....	3
1.1 Englishness and Colonialism .....	4
1.2 Constructing the Colonial Other .....	6
1.3 The Windrush Generation.....	9
1.4 National Identity and Globalization.....	13
2 The Windrush Generation in <i>Small Island</i> .....	16
2.1 The Empire .....	16
2.2 “London Is the Place for Me” .....	21
2.3 Hortense’s Shifting Identity .....	25
2.4 Homemaking in Hostility.....	30
2.5 Motherhood and Responsibility .....	33
3 Multicultural London in <i>White Teeth</i> .....	36
3.1 Assimilation as Corruption .....	36
3.2 “Strangers in Strange Lands” .....	40
3.3 Liberal Attitudes .....	48
Conclusion.....	50
Works Cited.....	52

## Introduction

My thesis will analyse how two opposing attitudes towards multiculturalism shaped the identities of coloured Commonwealth immigrants in the second half of the twentieth century, a period which brought great cultural and social changes to Britain. Multiculturalism has become a controversial term since the beginning of mass Commonwealth migration after the Second World War: while post-war ideals of democracy and equality celebrated cultural and ethnic diversity, mass migration also triggered a defensive counter-reaction which considered multiculturalism a threat to pure national identity. This happened during a period when, after centuries of imperialism, the British Empire's status as the greatest world power was coming to an end. Since British colonialism encouraged the colonized nations to consider Britain their mother country, post-war Commonwealth immigration was characterized by expectations of a welcoming environment, which soon resulted in disappointment. Theoretically, every Commonwealth citizen had an equal status and equal rights, and yet coloured British subjects were forced to question their Britishness, as white British society regarded them as immigrants, strangers, and even intruders.

Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) are contemporary literary responses against the racial othering which results from white British society's ingrained assumption of superiority. I will discuss questions of identity and belonging, using the theories of post-colonial thinkers such as Stuart Hall, Frantz Fanon, and Homi Bhabha. The first chapter provides a theoretical and historical frame for the thesis, discussing the key historical events, political attitudes, and post-colonial theories which are relevant to the analysis of the identities of coloured characters in the two novels. The next chapter concentrates on the representation of the Windrush generation in Levy's *Small Island* through a Jamaican couple who settle in London in 1948. The central concerns of the chapter are the contrast between expectations and reality; responsibility for Britain's colonial past;

and the creation of a collective defence mechanism against racial othering. The last chapter analyses the identities of coloured British characters in Smith's *White Teeth*, which narrates the lives of three generations of coloured Commonwealth immigrants in London, focusing on the last three decades of the twentieth century. This chapter will present the different attitudes of first and second-generation immigrants towards national identity and belonging; questions of assimilation; and cultural hybridity. The attitude of white British society will be central in the analysis of both novels, showing how conscious and unconscious racial othering affects the identities of the coloured characters, and demonstrating the possibility of unbiased attitudes which may lead to the successful integration of coloured citizens into British society.



## **1 Historical and Theoretical Background**

This chapter focuses on the discussion of the key historical events which led to the birth of multicultural and multiracial Britain, and the cultural, social and political problems that have arisen from the new, post-war ethnical landscape of the country. Creating a link between these historical events and social issues allows us to put the works of some of the most influential postcolonial thinkers into context, and thus acquire a deeper understanding of their theories on the central topic of my thesis: the identities of coloured Commonwealth immigrants in multicultural Britain.

Even though multicultural and multiracial Britain, as we know it today, was created after the Second World War, it is essential to look at earlier historical events, namely imperialism and the birth of modern nation-states, in order to understand how English identity was born and how it managed to create and oppress the identity of the colonized Other. English identity in this case stands for the “ethnically coded and culturally bounded English national identity” rather than the “ostensibly universal and open British imperial identity,” as termed by Graham MacPhee (43), an identity which was created by absorbing “the multitude of different regions, peoples, classes, genders that composed the people gathered together in the Act of Union” (“The Local and the Global” 22). What we see when we picture the British Empire during Queen Victoria’s rule in our head is great power and luxury resulting from the political and material benefits of colonialism. It was not until the Second World War that the mother country really started to feel the burden of responsibility towards its children. The impact of the dismantling of the empire and Commonwealth immigration was further strengthened by the effects of globalization, creating a new nation of great cultural and racial diversity.

This transformation in society happened during a fairly short period of time, in the course of half a century, and of course such sudden changes hardly ever occur without

problems arising along the way – in this case, problems of intensifying racism, discrimination, and confused identities, to mention the most important ones. It is this state of uncertainty which has influenced both novelists and postcolonial thinkers to create works which help us understand the origin of contemporary issues related to race and identity, and offer us the point of view of the Other – or indeed several Others – in order to broaden our perspective and help us move towards a future where cultural and racial differences are looked upon with understanding rather than fear and intolerance.

### **1.1 Englishness and Colonialism**

Imperialism brought great power to Britain, and that power brought even greater national pride with it. In order to understand how this particular pride of Englishness was born, first I would like to briefly discuss the emergence of modern nation-states and nationalism in Europe. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson gives a thorough overview of the birth of the phenomenon. He defines nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” It is imagined because citizens have an illusion of communion with each other, even though they only know a tiny fraction of their fellow countrymen in real life (6). The Enlightenment played a central role in the creation of nationalism in the late eighteenth century: religion was substituted by rationalism, therefore people needed another way to come to terms with their own mortality, and nation became “a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning” (11). There are three crucial elements which made it possible for the nation to take up the role of religion: capitalism, print, and “the fatality of human linguistic diversity.” Capitalism and print together transformed language: the mass distribution of printed material created a dominant dialect which gave language a sense of stability and made it possible for speakers of different vernaculars to understand each other (43-6). It is obvious that language

is at the centre of the whole phenomenon: it is through language that a sense of communion and a common culture are created.

What did it mean to be English during the age of imperialism? As mentioned before, it involved taking pride in the nation's international influence and its material products, for instance *English* tea, sugar, exotic spices and textiles. And, since language plays a central role in creating a nation, we can be sure that Englishness also involved taking pride in English literature, one of the major manifestations of English culture. But what was the Englishman like? How did he speak? How did he behave? If we think of the Victorian period, we imagine a gentleman wearing a frock coat and a top hat, drinking tea, reading the paper and speaking the Queen's English. However, even if that is the image of an Englishman, it is not *the* Englishman. As Stuart Hall points out, this national identity "represents itself as perfectly natural: born an Englishman, always will be, condensed, homogenous, unitary," but that stable, uniform vision of Englishness is far from reality:

It was only by dint of excluding or absorbing all the differences that constituted Englishness, the multitude of different regions, peoples, classes, genders that composed the people gathered together in the Act of Union, that Englishness could stand for everybody in the British Isles. It was always negotiated against difference. It always had to absorb all the differences of class, of region, of gender, in order to present itself as a homogenous entity. ("The Local and the Global" 22)

Creating this kind of unitary national identity is important to each individual because it provides them with a feeling of safety and stability in an unpredictable, ever-changing world ("Old and New Identities" 43). Anderson's idea about the nation substituting religion fulfils a similar function: it gives one a sense of purpose and belonging, and a way of making sense of mortality, something frightening and unpredictable.

## 1.2 Constructing the Colonial Other

The significance of postcolonial studies is to allow the Other to speak after a long period of silence when only the proud Englishman's voice could be heard, for it is his voice which both created and silenced the identity of the colonized. In this section, the binary oppositions of colonizer and colonized, white and black, English and Other, civilized and primitive, will be examined. Observing how the English used these concepts to justify their colonial pursuits will demonstrate how deeply flawed and harmful such a way of thinking is. The significance of language is brought to the foreground again, this time by Homi Bhabha, who points out that it is in discourse with the help of these binary oppositions that the identity of the Other is created. He calls this practice colonial discourse, whose objective is "to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (70). This form of discourse articulates differences based on the stereotypical thinking of imagined communities in order to induce discrimination and create racial and cultural hierarchy (67). Stuart Hall also argues that it is through the creation of binary oppositions by the "English eye" that the oppressed colonized identity was created ("The Local and the Global" 20-1).

The magic of the "English eye" and colonial discourse is that they could make colonial subjects accept and even believe in their authority. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, anticolonial intellectual and psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon writes extensively on the psychological effects of colonialism on the minds of the colonized:

Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above

his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (9)

He also emphasizes the importance of language in creating one's identity, observing that the more the Other masters the language of the colonizer, the whiter he becomes, and the closer he comes "to being a real human being," because language is the key to a given culture (8-9). However, adopting the colonizer's language or dialect causes a dislocation, a separation in the individual: his native group will be estranged from him but he will never be admitted into the community of the colonizer (11, 14). Fanon highlights the role of the colonizer in the creation of the Other's inferiority complex: "The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European's feeling of superiority. Let us have the courage to say it outright: *It is the racist who creates his inferior*" (69). As a result of his complex, the Other constantly wishes to be white, which is a phenomenon that Fanon calls "hallucinatory whitening" (74).

One way to establish such a dislocation and inferiority complex in colonized individuals is through education. Anderson highlights the importance of Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Education" from 1834, which contributed to the introduction of an English educational system in India, and later in other colonies of the Empire. "A single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" was Macaulay's infamous statement of English cultural superiority, which validated his wish to create, as he himself said, "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect" (qtd. in Anderson 90-1). To demonstrate the negative effects of Macaulayism, Anderson quotes the words of Indian writer Bipin Chandra Pal from 1932:

In those days the India-born Civilian practically cut himself off from his parent society, and lived and moved and had his being in the atmosphere so beloved of his British colleagues. In mind and manners he was as much an Englishman

as any Englishman. It was no small sacrifice for him, because in this way he completely estranged himself from the society of his own people and became socially and morally a pariah among them. . . . He was as much a stranger in his own native land as the European residents in the country. (92-3)

To bring the Indian civilian's experience closer to the complex Fanon describes, Anderson notes that "no matter how Anglicized a Pal became, he was always barred from the uppermost peaks of the Raj": even though he was estranged from his native society and felt identified with the English, he could never become part of their group, he remained permanently subordinated to them (93).

As a last thought concerning the construction of the colonial Other, I would like to mention the way in which ordinary British citizens perceived colonialism. It is important to point out that, apart from the exotic and luxurious consumer products that they enjoyed thanks to colonial labour, there was little else that they could see; they did not see how colonial subjects were exploited, oppressed, discriminated against, and deprived of their own culture and identity – the Other was invisible (MacPhee 49). Hall emphasizes this point in a powerful autobiographical sequence:

People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth. ("Old and New Identities" 48)

To add to the ordinary British citizen's unawareness concerning colonial oppression, Homi Bhabha recalls Ernest Renan's words from *What is a Nation?*: "every French citizen has to have forgotten [*is obliged to have forgotten*] Saint Bartholomew's Night's Massacre, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century" (qtd. in Bhabha 160, insertion

added by Bhabha), and observes that this kind of communal forgetting is the manifestation of national will in an attempt to create unity, but at the same time the obligation to forget is a constant reminder of that which is intentionally hidden, bringing to the foreground the problematic nature of a collective, essentialist national identity (160-1). The point in history when the hidden aspects of the British Empire finally surfaced was the Second World War. From that moment, an essentialist conception of Englishness was harder and harder to maintain, causing a fundamental transformation in British society.

### **1.3 The Windrush Generation**

To begin the discussion of the Windrush generation, some historical data will be used to demonstrate the paradox of Britain's attitude towards its colonial subjects. Not only did the Second World War bring a large influx of Commonwealth immigrants, it also changed Britain's power status in the world. In his comprehensive study of British immigration policy since 1939, Ian R. G. Spencer sheds light on the controversial nature of the way in which Britain handled its colonial subjects. The war made it necessary to recruit citizens from the colonies to help defend the mother country or join the workforce, which caused the coloured population to spread to major cities (13). Before that, the number of people of colour in England was negligible: they mostly worked at seaports, hence their presence was transitory and peripheral (14). Now their wartime experience encouraged a great number of them to settle in the mother country that they had helped defend, partly because most of them faced poverty and unemployment upon returning to their native land after the war. What they did not know at first is that even though their help was welcomed during a time of imperial defence, peacetime Britain favoured employing white European immigrants to reduce the significant labour shortage caused by the war because coloured immigrants were "difficult to assimilate" (17-9, 61). A number of Working Party reports tried to find evidence of the negative effects of coloured Commonwealth immigration to the mother country, but they

ended in failure: the data showed that coloured immigrants did not contribute to either high crime and unemployment rates or the spread of serious diseases. In fact, they were “absorbed with amazing speed into the job market.” The only area which raised concerns was housing: overcrowding was common, resulting in the creation of poor coloured areas in big cities. Of course, this problem could have been solved rather easily by the improvement of housing conditions, but the government feared that it would attract even more immigrants. As there was no significant economic evidence showing the disadvantages of coloured immigration, the Working Party concluded that “[t]he immigrants are not being assimilated and tend to become identified with the lowest class of the population. Social tension is likely to increase as the number of immigrants increases.” Spencer points out that “the official mind made recommendations based on predictions about the likelihood of future difficulties which were founded on prejudice rather than on evidence derived from the history of the Asian and black presence in Britain” (110-20). The words of C. W. MacMullan from the Ministry of Labour highlight the same biased and narrow-minded attitude: “My personal view is that these people would be far more trouble than they are worth. If we agree to anything it is out of altruism and not out of self-interest” (qtd. in Spencer 40). What can be observed here is a government desperately trying to find an excuse to restrict coloured immigration into the country, even though in reality English economy only benefited from their presence. The real reason for the government’s concern was an irrational fear of the Other, based purely on prejudice.

To fully understand the paradox of the relationship between England and its colonies, it is necessary to point out why the government waited until 1962 to introduce the first restrictive measures on Commonwealth immigration. Following the Second World War, many of the British Empire’s colonies gained more autonomy and started moving towards independence (Spencer 22). Even though once it was the largest empire in the world, after the war Britain found itself overshadowed by the new world power, the United States, gradually



losing its overseas territories and its international influence (MacPhee 8). Spencer points out that the Commonwealth was a way of countering the losses of decolonization; it kept the former colonies which now became independent states attached to Britain in a way, creating “an illusion of international power and influence.” Moreover, the economic side of preserving a close bond with the old colonies was equally relevant: the Commonwealth made up nearly half of Britain’s overseas trade (66). Decolonization and new ideas of freedom and equality motivated the British government to grant the same rights to every Commonwealth citizen, which resulted in the British Nationality Act of 1948, according to which “any and every British subject had the right to enter Britain, vote, stand for Parliament and join the armed forces” (53). However, there was political hostility hiding under the welcoming façade, as demonstrated by the Working Party reports and the attitude of the Ministry of Labour. Lord Swinton from the Commonwealth Relations Office summarized why it was necessary for the government to keep up a welcoming appearance:

If we legislate on immigration, though we can draft it in non-discriminatory terms, we cannot conceal the obvious fact that the object is to keep out coloured people. Unless there is really a strong case for this, it would surely be an unwise moment to raise the issue when we are preaching, and trying to practise, partnership and the abolition of the colour bar. (qtd. in Spencer 64)

His words prove that the government was fully conscious of the paradox between appearance and reality, between Britain’s colonial responsibilities and prejudiced self-interest. On the other hand, Commonwealth citizens who received a British education and proudly defended the mother country during the Second World War saw nothing but the welcoming façade, and imagined that they were coming *home* to the mother country for which they had risked their lives.

Upon arrival, the coloured immigrants' expectations of a friendly, welcoming Britain with plenty of opportunities to make a living were shattered by a harsh reality. They encountered hostility and discrimination in almost every area of life. The profundity of the shock that they experienced when the place which they believed to be home kept excluding them can be comprehended by remembering Frantz Fanon's psychological analysis of the inferiority complex and the "hallucinatory whitening" of the Other, and Bipin Chandra Pal's description of the "stranger in his own native land." Stuart Hall uses the term "Identity Politics One" to refer to the defence mechanism that first-generation immigrants developed to cope with the shock and disappointment of British reality, and describes it as

the first form of identity politics. It had to do with the constitution of some defensive collective identity against the practices of racist society. It had to do with the fact that people were being blocked out of and refused an identity and identification within the majority nation, having to find some other roots on which to stand. Because people have to find some ground, some place, some position on which to stand. Blocked out of any access to an English or British identity, people had to try to discover who they were ... It is the crucial moment of the rediscovery or the search for roots. ("Old and New Identities" 52)

This search for roots leads to the "imaginary political re-identification" of the Other, a re-identification which results in the creation of a counter-politics that allows the voice of the oppressed and excluded to be heard. It is this collective identification which has led to the birth of Black as a political identity, based on the following logic: "We may be different actual color skins but vis-a-vis the social system, vis-a-vis the political system of racism, there is more that unites us than what divides us." However, Hall warns against considering Black an essentialism because it has "a certain way of silencing the very specific experiences of

Asian people” and the experiences of those black subjects who do not wish to be associated with this collective identity (“Old and New Identities” 53-6). The following section will be concerned with the necessity to leave binary thinking behind and view identity in a non-essentialist way.

#### **1.4 National Identity and Globalization**

The new form of globalization which arrived with the rise of the United States to its global power status changed the role of the nation. In his essay on globalization and ethnicity, Stuart Hall explains that the new kind of global mass culture which was created after the Second World War has caused the emergence of new concepts of identity. This global mass culture is characterized by a form of homogenization very different from that of Englishness which worked by “excluding or absorbing all the differences” of British citizens. Instead, “[i]t is wanting to *recognize* and absorb those differences within the larger, overarching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world” (“The Local and the Global” 28, emphasis added). The global post-modern is advancing towards a moment when “there is no difference which it cannot contain, no otherness it cannot speak, no marginality which it cannot take pleasure out of” (33). This process is leading to the erosion of nation-states, which Hall considers a particularly dangerous moment: the threat of globalization leads the nation “into an even deeper trough of defensive exclusivism” whose culmination he sees during Thatcherism in Britain (25), which “built a resurgent British nationalism on an idealised conception of Englishness” (MacPhee 117). The most dangerous aspect of the Thatcherite national identity was that its fear from change and disappearance was manifested in “a very aggressive form of racism” (“The Local and the Global” 26).

It was during this contradictory period of acceptance and exclusivism that coloured immigrants struggled to find their voice and their identity in the mother country. It has been mentioned that Homi Bhabha identifies “colonial discourse” as a strategy which uses binary

oppositions to justify authority over the colonized. Similarly, he sees nation as “a narrative strategy” which uses the same binary logic to exclude all of those who are culturally different (140). People have a double role in the national narrative. On the one hand, they represent the homogenous community that the narrative aims to create, but on the other hand, they also draw attention to the “contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population” (146). He explains:

We are confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The barred Nation *It/Self*, alienated from its eternal self-generation, becomes a liminal signifying space that is internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference. (148)

Bhabha points out that the role of counter-narratives of the nation is to “evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries” and show that it is impossible to regard the nation as an essentialist concept (149).

“Identity Politics One” was the first step for coloured immigrants to cope with the unexpected hostility and racism of British society, but as Black is not an essentialist identity, differences within the group started to be articulated. This is what Stuart Hall calls “the politics of living identity through difference”:

It is the politics of recognizing that all of us are composed of multiple social identities, not of one. That we are all complexly constructed through different categories, of different antagonisms, and these may have the effect of locating us socially in multiple positions of marginality and subordination, but which do not yet operate on us in exactly the same way. (“Old and New Identities” 57)

It is important to recognize not only that we are made up of multiple identities, but also “that those identities do not remain the same, that they are frequently contradictory, that they cross-cut one another, that they tend to locate us differently at different moments” (“Old and New Identities” 59). It is this recognition that has led to the birth of literary works like Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*. While *Small Island* concentrates on the struggles of Windrush generation immigrants to re-construct their identity as they come to terms with a hostile British reality, *White Teeth* takes us to late-twentieth-century London and shows us examples of “the politics of living identity through difference.”

## 2 The Windrush Generation in *Small Island*

Andrea Levy's *Small Island* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* are two contemporary literary reactions to Britain's colonial past, depicting Commonwealth immigrants and their descendants as they are trying to find their place in a changing world. Struggles against racism are still very much present in our time, but by fictionalizing London between 1948 and 2000, the two novels allow the Other to retell the birth of multicultural Britain, offering alternatives to Britain's colonial narrative.

In *Small Island*, Levy uses the four protagonists – the Jamaican Hortense and Gilbert, and the English Queenie and Bernard – as narrators to tell the story of Windrush generation immigrants from a number of different perspectives. This way Levy protests against the dominance of one narrative, demonstrating that everybody's voice is needed in order to understand the full story. Michael Perfect connects the novel's multiple narration to Edward Said's theory of the contrapuntal, which calls for the understanding of imperial history as “a set of ... intertwined and overlapping histories” (qtd. in Perfect 32). Perfect emphasizes that “Britain cannot be reconciled with itself until it understands and embraces the complexities of its own history” (37), which is the central message of *Small Island*.

### 2.1 The Empire

*Small Island* starts with a “Prologue,” through which Levy immediately establishes an atmosphere of confusion, ignorance and prejudice surrounding Britain's relationship with its colonies, attitudes that will be explored and challenged throughout the novel. In the “Prologue,” one of the four protagonists and narrators, Queenie, recalls the day she was taken to the British Empire Exhibition in Wembley a few years after the end of the Great War. The aim of such an exhibition, of course, was to show the British public that they indeed had a good reason to be proud of their nation: “the different woods of Burma,” “the coffee of

Jamaica,” “the sugar of Barbados,” “the chocolate of Grenada” (4), and many other exotic consumer products that the British could enjoy as a result of imperialism. However, the abundance of material goods calls the reader’s attention to the absence of those who produced them; the colonial subjects, thanks to whom these products were present at the exhibition, are missing from the description (Bonnici 90). This echoes Stuart Hall’s observation on the ordinary British citizen’s unawareness of colonial past and present, emphasizing that Commonwealth immigrants had symbolically been in Britain for centuries before the moment when they physically arrived during and after the Second World War (“Old and New Identities” 48). They had been there through the products which are described in the “Prologue” of *Small Island*, the products which British citizens proudly consumed without ever thinking about the colonial subjects who had produced them. Hall takes tea, a typically English commodity, as an example:

Where does it come from? Ceylon — Sri Lanka, India. That is the outside history that is inside the history of the English. There is no English history without that other history. The notion that identity has to do with people that look the same, feel the same, call themselves the same, is nonsense. (“Old and New Identities” 49)

Ignoring colonial reality serves as a way of justifying imperialism. By simply believing that the colonized are uncivilized and in need of guidance makes it much more pleasant to drink the tea they produce, but at the same time it creates strong stereotypes which are difficult to overcome once the colonizer faces the Other in real life. This is demonstrated in the “Prologue” when the young Queenie meets a black man, a “monkey man sweating a smell of mothballs” (6). Their encounter is built on colonial stereotypes of an inferior and uncivilized Other. The colonizer’s superior but obviously ignorant attitude is voiced through one of Queenie’s companions, Graham, who ridiculed a black lady at the exhibition, and then

loudly stated: “She can’t understand what I’m saying ... They’re not civilised. They only understand drums” (5). It was also Graham who tried to embarrass Queenie by encouraging her to kiss the black man. He was dumbfounded when the person that he believed to be a primitive savage reacted kindly and politely, saying: “Perhaps we could shake hands instead?” (6). To further undermine and mock Graham’s ingrained assumption of superiority, the black man politely gave him directions to the toilet – “Over there by the tree there is a rest room where I think you will find what you need” – which he was unable to understand and follow, having “to wee behind some bins” (7) like an uncivilized savage. The shock and embarrassment caused by the black man’s unexpected politeness and civility confused Graham; his sense of assumed superiority was destabilized. As Bonnici explains, the encounter signals “the decentralizing of the tenets and the de-hinging of the superiority through which the other is seen, [resulting in] an estrangement from the hierarchization and the objectification that the [colonizer] tries to maintain” (Bonnici 90).

After the act of decentralization, however, the “Prologue” ends by the reestablishment of British superiority by Queenie’s father. Queenie recalls the way he explained the unexpected kindness and good manners of the black man at the exhibition:

Father said later that this African man I was made to shake hands with would have been a chief or a prince in Africa. Evidently, when they speak English you know that they have learned to be civilised – taught English by the white man, missionaries probably. So father told me not to worry about having shaken his hand because the African man was most likely a potentate. (7)

By claiming that the well-spoken and educated Other must have belonged to the top ranks of his primitive society, Queenie’s father made racist assumptions that reinforced colonial beliefs about white superiority (Johansen 394). The unknown is explained, and thus order is seemingly restored, but to make sure that the young Queenie would forget the embarrassing



encounter and leave the exhibition feeling proud of their great Empire, her father took her on a ride on the scenic railway. When their carriage reached the top, he told her: “See here, Queenie. Look around. You’ve got the whole world at your feet, lass” (7). Bonnici notes that even though the father’s remark is “a reaffirmation of Eurocentric views,” it is clear that the “Prologue” proves the moral superiority of the colonized subject (Bonnici 90). This way the “Prologue” serves to establish the central issue of *Small Island*: the presence of the Other in a land where he is considered a stranger and an intruder, even though he has been an integral (though invisible) part of the Empire for hundreds of years.

The long absence of Queenie’s husband, Bernard, from the novel creates the illusion that he might have died as a hero defending his country in India, but his return in chapter “Thirty-four” reveals that he is not at all a heroic character. Bernard joins the other three protagonists as a narrator in chapter “Thirty-five,” and his recollections of the war reveal his racism and ignorance. He claims to be “proud to be part of the British Empire. Proud to represent decency” (379), possessing what Stuart Hall calls the identity of Englishness: “a strongly centered, highly exclusive and exclusivist form of cultural identity [which places the colonized] in their otherness, in their marginality” (“The Local and the Global” 20). His pride is mixed with ignorance, making him regard the Other as inferior and uncivilized. As a result of his blind imperial mind-set, Bernard is unwilling to learn about the people of the country where he has been staying for years: “How are we supposed to tell the difference [between Hindu and Muslim]? How those coolies recognised one another as an enemy was a mystery to all. After two years in India, they still all looked the same to me” (371). He also adds that the riots resulting from the Hindu-Muslim opposition have “nothing to do with us” (369), which shows that he is unaware of Britain’s involvement in colonial conflicts which in fact have emerged as a consequence of imperialism. Michael Perfect observes that Bernard’s “ignorance allows him to regard the British Empire as being a civilized, civilizing and even

altruistic force for good that is trying to prevent the uncivilized violence, rather than as a colonial power that is largely responsible for that violence” (Perfect 38). This attitude is not restricted to Bernard. Its presence in real life made it possible for the British Empire to invade and exploit a great number of countries in the name of civilization.

Levy juxtaposes Bernard’s superiority and indifference with the attitude of the locals.

An Indian soldier, Ashok, enthusiastically tells Bernard:

I am not one of those people who wish the English out of India. I like you. Are you not protecting us all this time from the filthy Japs with their slitty eyes? Your British bulldog understands that there is nothing worse than foreigners invading your land ... A dreadful thing to have foreign muddy boots stamping all over your soil. Do you not think? (386)

Ashok’s beliefs reflect the inferiority complex of the Other that Fanon describes as a result of living “in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race” (Fanon 74). Ashok does not believe in the value of his own culture. The power of colonial discourse made him accept his inferiority to the extent that he does not realize that the British themselves are foreigners invading his land. It is partly this unconditional acceptance of Britain’s greatness that made so many Commonwealth immigrants settle in their beloved mother country after the Second World War.

As a last remark on the Empire, it is necessary to mention Bernard’s encounter with the young prostitute in Calcutta. The man who is “[p]roud to represent decency” only realizes after the intercourse that the girl is “[f]ourteen or even twelve. A small girl” (413). Seeing “the fear in her black eyes – harmless as a baby’s” and watching her cringe “lower to the ground like a cornered animal” (413-4) makes Bernard realize what he has done: “I felt like a beast” (414). Corinne Duboin notes that this incident represents “the barbarity of the colonizer ... [It] is symbolic of colonial relations and the perversity of hegemonic power seen as a form

of rape” (Duboin 12). Even though Bernard breaks down crying when he sees the human being behind the uncivilized prostitute he violated, he soon regains his indifferent attitude: “I just threw the money at the wretched whore, then left” (414-5).

## 2.2 “London Is the Place for Me”

The title of this subchapter makes reference to a song sung by a Trinidadian musician nicknamed Lord Kitchener onboard the Empire Windrush towards the mother country. His songs form part of the Trinidadian calypso, a musical form which “traditionally had lyrics that addressed topical events and concerns, providing a means of popular expression and communication that circumvented the official channels of colonial culture,” a tradition which Commonwealth immigrants from the West Indies continued in Britain (MacPhee 44), where they played in clubs and recorded studio albums (Cowley 90, 94). MacPhee points out that this form of popular social commentary demonstrates the changing attitudes of colonial subjects, drawing a sharp contrast between the initial enthusiasm and the disappointment which followed their settlement in the mother country. Onboard the Windrush, Lord Kitchener sang “English people are very much sociable” and “I am glad to know my mother country,” expressing the expectations of all his fellow immigrants, but after settling in England he sang: “Me landlady’s too rude ... she likes to intrude,” reflecting Britain’s hostility towards its colonial subjects (44). Such popular songs serve as real-life records of the sentiments of ordinary coloured immigrants, and as a way of countering the dominant voice of colonial discourse.

The contrast between expectations and reality is reflected in the structure of *Small Island*, whose chapters are organized into two time frames: “1948” and “Before.” “Before” covers various events in the lives of the four protagonists leading up to the crucial moment of Gilbert’s and Hortense’s arrival in London in 1948. Their experiences back in Jamaica, Hortense’s English education, and Gilbert’s participation in the Second World War to protect

the mother country, all build up a sense of belonging to Britain, an idealized home that they had never seen. Hortense is proud of her sophisticated manners and impeccable English, and feels like she stands out from the multitude of dark-skinned Jamaicans who speak the local dialect and live a simple rural lifestyle. The way she describes her family demonstrates this attitude. She speaks about her father, Lovell Roberts, with respect and admiration: “My father was a man of class. A man of character. A man of intelligence. Noble in a way that made him a legend” (37). Her desire is to live up to her father’s reputation and assumed nobility: “If I was given to my father’s cousins for upbringing, I could learn to read and write and perform all my times tables. And more. I could become a lady worthy of my father, wherever he might be” (38). However, this father, “wherever he might be,” has always been absent from Hortense’s life. All she knows are the pictures of him cut out from newspapers and the stories her townspeople tell about him (37). In this regard, I would like to argue that Lovell Roberts becomes the symbol of the distant mother country: he is admired and taken as an example to follow based on second-hand sources, but his greatness might only be an illusion, which is emphasized by the fact that Hortense herself is an illegitimate child, born after Lovell’s short romance with – or rather, exploitation of – an ordinary country girl called Alberta.

If her father represents Hortense’s beloved Britain, her mother can be considered the native land that she longs to leave behind. Alberta is described without any affection, always mentioned by Hortense by her first name: “I do not recall the colour of her eyes, the shape of her lips or the feel of her skin. Alberta was a country girl who could neither read nor write nor perform even the rudiments of her times tables” (38). Besides her parents’ different social status, Hortense highlights the importance of the colour of their skin:

I grew to look as my father did. My complexion was as light as his; the colour of warm honey. It was not the bitter chocolate hue of Alberta and her mother.

With such a countenance there was a chance of a golden life for I. What, after all, could Alberta give? Bare black feet skipping over stones. (38)

Stuart Hall recalls his youth in Jamaica and observes that the word “Black” as a reference to identity had never been uttered: “I had never ever heard anybody either call themselves, or refer to anybody else as “Black.” Never. I heard a thousand other words. My grandmother could differentiate about fifteen different shades between light brown and dark brown,” adding that

anybody in my family could compute and calculate anybody's social status by grading the particular quality of their hair versus the particular quality of the family they came from and which street they lived in, including physiognomy, shading, etc. (“Old and New Identities” 53)

Through Hortense’s example, however, Levy shows us that even though Jamaican people did not think of themselves as one end of the binary opposition of black and white, the hierarchy they established based on their citizens’ skin colour was founded on the assumed superiority of the colonizer: they associated the lightness of their skin with their proximity to the idealized mother country. The light-skinned Hortense might ask: “What, after all, could *Jamaica* give?”

Hortense’s mother and grandmother represent two ways of dealing with Commonwealth immigration after the war. The mother, Alberta, is sent off to Cuba by Lovell’s family (39) as a way of covering up the noble father’s tiny misstep instead of taking responsibility for it. It is the same reluctance to take responsibility that makes Bernard and the majority of his fellow soldiers observe the Hindu-Muslim riots with detachment and state that it had nothing to do with them (369), and that made post-war British society hostile towards the immigrants who had formed part of their empire for hundreds of years and risked their lives to defend it. After getting rid of the mother, Lovell’s family is kind enough to take

Hortense's grandmother in as a servant (39). In a political context, the scene recalls the statement of C. W. MacMullan, mentioned earlier in this thesis (see page 10), where he considers the welcoming of Commonwealth immigrants an act of altruism. In *Small Island*, the grandmother, Miss Jewel, grows to represent everything that Hortense feels ashamed of about her background. She was a simple woman, Hortense remembers: "Her legs bowed," "[h]er breasts wobbled" and she had "colossal leather-worn hands" (42) resulting from a long life of physical work. She sucked her teeth and spoke the colonizer's language like many other Jamaicans of her social status: "Me nuh know, Miss Hortense. When me mudda did pregnant dem she smaddy obeah'er" (43). The young Hortense even expressed her dissatisfaction with her grandmother's way of speaking: "you should learn to speak properly as the King of England does. Not in this rough country way" (43). Through her English education, Hortense gets ready to leave behind the "rough country way" of Jamaica and fulfil the destiny she believes was assigned to her by her reputable father: "I would soon be living in England and able to rise far above these people" (102).

In Gilbert's case, it is his wartime experience that makes him long for something bigger than his own small island, Jamaica. Upon returning home after the war, he realizes: "Jamaica was no universe: it ran only a few miles before it fell into the sea ... I was shocked by the awful realisation that, man, we Jamaicans are all small islanders too!" (196), and tells his cousin why he wishes to return to England: "I have seen it with my own eye. The world out there is bigger than any dream you can conjure ... I need opportunity, Elwood. I need advancement" (207). Unlike Hortense, Gilbert does not idealize England because of the assumed moral and cultural superiority of the colonizer. He has been there, he already knows the mother country, the "filthy tramp ... [who] offers you no comfort after your journey" (139), and yet he wants to return because seeing the world has made him feel like "a giant living on land no bigger than the soles of [his] shoes" (209). Through Gilbert, Levy

“constructs a shifting black subjectivity reshaped by the experience of migrancy” (Duboin 9), resembling Bipin Chandra Pal’s account of the “stranger in his own native land” (qtd. in Anderson 93).

Apart from realizing that Jamaica is a small place with limited possibilities, having fought the war in the United States and England also fills Gilbert with pride. He remembers seeing himself in the mirror in his RAF uniform: “I looked like a god” (125), and impressing girls with his wartime stories: “a dainty girl like Celia Langley, who would gasp excited at my traveller’s tales, puffed me proud as a prince” (209). Hortense and Gilbert both develop a close relationship with the mother country: Hortense through her legendary father and English education, and Gilbert through the war. This proximity causes them to feel superior to their own people and too great for their own country, imagining London as their destiny, as the ideal place which can provide them with opportunities that they could not even dream of in Jamaica.

### **2.3 Hortense’s Shifting Identity**

The arrival in the mother country shattered all the illusions that Commonwealth immigrants had of a polite, welcoming nation which considers them fellow British citizens of equal status. Levy beautifully expresses this stark contrast between expectations and reality in a section narrated by Gilbert:

Let me ask you to imagine this. Living far from you is a beloved relation whom you have never met. Yet this relation is so dear a kin she is known as Mother. Your own mummy talks of Mother all the time. ‘Oh, Mother is a beautiful woman – refined, mannerly and cultured.’ Your daddy tells you, ‘Mother thinks of you as her children; like the Lord above she takes care of you from afar’ ... The filthy tramp that eventually greets you is she. Ragged, old and dusty as the long dead. Mother has a blackened eye, bad breath and one lone

tooth that waves in her head when she speaks. Can this be that fabled relation you heard so much of? This twisted-crooked weary woman. This stinking cantankerous whore. She offers you no comfort after your journey. No smile. No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, ‘Who the bloody hell are you?’ (139)

The reality experienced in London also takes Hortense by surprise. She keeps asking Gilbert: “Is this the way the English live?” (22). The influence of colonial discourse is clearly visible in her case: in Jamaica, Hortense was taught only those things that the British were proud of, for example their polite manners, but now in war-stricken England she sees poverty, misery, rudeness, and ordinary people who, in their manners, do not resemble either the King of England or the educated and sophisticated English teachers she had back home. On her second day in London, Queenie offers to take her shopping, assuring her that she is not afraid of being seen with “darkies” in public, which makes Hortense wonder: “Now, why should this woman worry to be seen in the street with me? After all, I was a teacher and she was only a woman whose living was obtained from the letting of rooms. If anyone should be shy it should be I. And what is a darkie?” (231). She is not aware of racial prejudice yet, what strikes her is Queenie’s plain and direct way of speaking, and her “dismal garment”: “Could the woman not see this coat was not only ugly but too small for her?” (329). She feels more English than Queenie: she speaks “the most exemplary English in the known world. The BBC” (449) and dresses elegantly with “[her] coat clean, [her] gloves freshly washed and a hat upon [her] head” (329), which is of course not the way ordinary women dress in post-war England. The notion of Englishness she has in her head is based on an idealized image of the nation which was spread in the colonies through colonial discourse.

Little by little, Hortense starts to notice the presence of racial prejudice which has surrounded her since the moment she set foot in England. The shock caused by seeing war-



stricken London is gradually intensified by the realization that she is considered a racial Other. As a result, she has “to come to terms with the idea of London as an illusion, as a dream built on the foundations of the colonial myth,” as Susheila Nasta notes (qtd. in Evelyn 131). Hortense is incredibly proud and perseverant; Gilbert calls her an “insufferable creature” (447). When white people stare or shout at her in public, she always ignores them, often repeating the sentence “I pay them no mind.” This suggests that her coping mechanism involves an unconscious denial of the reality around her. Hortense practically deceives herself by not admitting that she is the target of racism, but in this way she manages to preserve her pride and dignity. In fact, it is her presumed identity which deceives her: all her life, Hortense believed that she was meant to rise above ordinary Jamaicans through her light complexion, her English education, and her sophistication, which make her *almost* English. Due to her pride and her “English” identity, it is impossible for her to imagine that people could consider her inferior, and thus she ignores the hostile stares and rude shouts, even though they are obviously directed at her. For instance, when three young men call her a “darkie” and try to throw a piece of bread at her which accidentally lands on Queenie’s arm, all she worries about is Queenie’s coat: “Look, they have dirtied up your sleeve” (335).

However, there comes a moment when she cannot deny the presence of racism around her any more, a moment that Gilbert remembers as “a sharp slap from the Mother Country’s hand” (458). She has always been proud of her education and confident about becoming a teacher in London, until the moment when she is rejected at a job interview with the made-up reason of not being qualified (453-4). Despite the rudeness of the interviewer, Hortense maintains the same attitude as before, not acknowledging that she is being discriminated against, and leaves the school saying: “I will come back again when I am qualified to teach in this country” (455). But when she meets Gilbert after the interview, she breaks down crying. Gilbert recalls: “Steady as a rainpipe, the crystal water ran from her eye ... Come, this was

probably the first time the woman's cheek ever felt a tear. She was insufferable! ... She was snivelling and trying with all her will not to wipe her nose on her good white glove" (457-8). Gilbert comforts her with kindness and humour, and for the first time he sees the real Hortense under her mask of pride. As they take a ride on top of a double decker, Hortense looks at London's famous monuments with childlike excitement (461-2). However, the joyful sightseeing tour ends abruptly when Hortense is made to face reality again by a little boy who touches her, says "You're black," and runs off (463). Gilbert's narration demonstrates how the awareness of her otherness reappears after the incident:

Hortense, all at once aware of people around her, straightened her hat and pulled at her gloves.

'You like the palace?' I asked her.

Stiff and composed she replied, 'I have seen it in books.'

'People always stare on us, Hortense,' I told her.

'And I pay them no mind,' she snapped back to me.

'Good, because you know what? The King has the same problem.' But her nose had risen into the air and I feared I was losing her once more. (463)

Hortense's identity, which she believed to be stable, and which guided every choice she made in life, has been shattered by the mother country's hostility and exclusivism, which has made it necessary for her to discover a new form of belonging. I would like to connect this process to Stuart Hall's theory discussed in the first chapter. Being excluded from white British society, Hortense adopts a "defensive collective identity against the practices of racist society," which Hall terms "Identity Politics One" ("Old and New Identities" 52), demonstrated in the following sequence narrated by Gilbert:

[T]hree boys came greeting me with a cheery nod, looking on Hortense with a wink of: 'Okay there, man – you have a pretty coloured lady.'

‘You know these men?’ Hortense asked.

‘They are from home,’ I told her.

‘And you know them all?’

‘I know they are from home.’

‘But you don’t know them?’

‘No, but I know they are from home.’ I did not tell her that some days I was so pleased to see a black face I felt to run and hug the familiar stranger. (463)

Even though he does not tell her, Hortense immediately understands the bond Gilbert feels with fellow immigrants from the West Indies. Soon after that they meet another black man. His skin is “dusted grey with dirt,” and he is wearing “baggy stained trousers” and “dirty shoes.” Earlier, the sophisticated Hortense would not even have looked at a poor man like that, but now, having found a new sense of belonging, it takes her only a second of hesitation to interact with him (465-6).

Furthermore, Stuart Hall also explains that “[b]locked out of any access to an English or British identity, people had to try to discover who they were ... It is the crucial moment of the rediscovery or the search for roots,” in which language plays an important role (“Old and New Identities” 52). This aspect of identity re-construction is also clearly present in Hortense’s character. Her way of speaking is extremely sophisticated. In fact, she speaks in a much more refined manner than ordinary English people, calling their speech “a low-class slurring garble” (449). In contrast, characters who do not wish to hide their Jamaican origin speak in a simple and often ungrammatical way, and characteristically suck their teeth. After the disillusioning job interview at the school, Hortense tells Gilbert with tears in her eyes: “I dreamed of coming to London ... What am I to do now?” (464), and then “suck[s] on her teeth in a most unladylike manner” (465). In one of the final chapters of the novel, which shall be discussed later in relation to homemaking, the reader gets another glimpse of the Hortense

who is not ashamed of her Jamaican origin, as she reassuringly tells her husband: “Gilbert, come, you no scared of a little hard work” (503).

#### **2.4 Homemaking in Hostility**

How can diasporic people find a home in a land which keeps excluding them? Taking into account that “[h]ome is imagined to be a mythical place of desire which, characteristic of the diaspora, has to be constructed through experience, [and is] linked to the inclusion and exclusion processes lived by the subject and to the sense of belonging produced under certain circumstances,” it is apparent that “[a] tension exists between the concept of home and the idea of diaspora” (Bonnici 95). In this light, Kim Evelyn observes that Hortense’s efforts to turn their tiny rented room in Queenie’s house into a pleasant home can be considered a way of “escaping the daily racism that [Hortense and Gilbert] confront in Britain,” based on bell hooks’ theory about homes as sites of resistance (Evelyn 137). According to hooks, homemaking gives black communities the opportunity to restore “the dignity denied ... in the public world” by creating a private place where they “do not directly encounter white racist aggression” (qtd. in Evelyn 137). The effort to preserve dignity is demonstrated in a scene where Gilbert arrives home and shouts at Hortense with “anger so loud the force bounce from the wall” because she is cleaning the floor on her knees (318). After he calms down, he tells her: “I cannot see you on your knees so soon. I did not bring you to England to scrub a floor on your knees. No wife of mine will be on her knees in this country. You hear me?” (319).

The domestic refuge that Hortense and Gilbert built with great care is destroyed all of a sudden after Bernard’s return. When they unexpectedly find Bernard in their room, he informs them that as he is the owner, he can go anywhere he pleases without asking for permission (470). Bernard thinks: “My house, and I’ve a key to every room ... I fought a war to protect home and hearth. Not to be invaded by stealth” (470). Kim Evelyn notes that this statement creates “the most direct link between the house and the nation by drawing upon the

often repeated domestic metaphor of the nation as a house, [making Bernard] a figure for the exclusionary redefinition of national belonging” (Evelyn 144-5). Bernard’s like-minded neighbour, Mr. Todd, shares the belief that Commonwealth immigrants are merely “guests in this country” (118), and indeed, being depicted in a rented room emphasizes the temporal nature of their residence (Evelyn 136). Bernard’s aggressive and blinded behaviour is a literary equivalent of Stuart Hall’s observation about the erosion of nation-states in the age of globalization, when the nation “goes into an even deeper trough of defensive exclusivism,” in Britain’s case manifested in Thatcherism, which “brings Englishness into a more firm definition, a narrower but firmer definition than it ever had before” (“The Local and the Global” 25). In fact, it has been noted that Bernard and Mr. Todd utter terms used by the two most well-known politicians who tried to maintain a pure national identity: Margaret Thatcher and Enoch Powell (Evelyn 144, Johansen 389).

With their private space violated, Gilbert and Hortense know that it is impossible for them to stay and build a real home in Queenie and Bernard’s house. In a state of insecurity in a country which refuses to accept them, help comes to the Jamaican couple through another fellow coloured tenant, Winston, who is planning to buy a house and offers Gilbert a deal: “I wan’ you come fix up the place, Gilbert. You can come live there with your new wife. Other room we board to people from home. No Englishwoman rent. Honest rent you can collect up. And then you see the place is kept nice” (499). Moving into a diasporic community once again evokes Stuart Hall’s Identity Politics One. As Evelyn explains, “[t]his house is to become a safe, diasporic homeplace by housing members of the diaspora in a space free of the pervasive racism of the nation outside” (Evelyn 145). It is revealing to compare Hortense’s reaction when she first sees the tiny run-down room in Queenie’s house (20), and when she sees the room which is in a very similar state in Winston’s house (502). She asks “Just this?” in both cases, but her attitude has completely changed. First, she was shocked by the poor

condition of Gilbert's room in a country where she imagined everything to be beautiful and sophisticated. Since then, exposure to English reality has dispersed her idealistic expectations, and now she perfectly understands that they cannot ask for more than the run-down room that they are planning to rent.

Exclusion from the society she admired and the creation of a bond with the community she always wished to escape have had an impact on Hortense's identity, but her attitude towards home is still dominated by British ideals. Even though the English have humiliated her and discriminated against her, the colonial upbringing she received throughout her life has left a lasting mark on her identity. She is enthusiastic to turn their new room into a real home, but her idea of home is essentially British, which can be noticed as she tells Gilbert: "and two armchairs here in front of an open English fire. You will see – we will make it nice" (504). Kim Evelyn observes that "England and domestic ideals remain inseparable for Hortense. Hortense's dream is a fiction of an English home based on the colonial ideals instilled in her" (Evelyn 145). On the other hand, it has been mentioned that she is now getting closer to her roots, speaking in her native Jamaican dialect from time to time, and accepting her place in the diasporic community. The complexity of her experiences in London has led to the hybridization of her identity, which raises important questions about her sense of belonging in the metropolis. The colonial ideals were the foundation she built her whole life on, and thus it is natural that they cannot be eradicated overnight. Gilbert once tells her: "not everything the English do is good" (328). This way he warns her that she should not blindly follow and copy everything that she learned from her English teachers about the mother country back home, but his statement also implies that there *are* good things they do, things that are worth following. The finding of a diasporic home ends the novel positively, suggesting that the couple has found a safe starting place for their quest to make London their home.

## 2.5 Motherhood and Responsibility

The theme of motherhood is significant in *Small Island* for two reasons. Firstly, if Bernard represents the brutal and ignorant colonizer in the novel, his wife, Queenie, can be considered another side of Britain; the tolerant, caring mother country, who is aware of her responsibilities towards her colonial children. She befriends Gilbert during the war, and then takes him in together with other coloured Commonwealth immigrants. She admits: “I’ve got the room and I need the money” (116), but money is not the only reason why she decides to rent rooms to coloured tenants. She remarks: “Memories around here might be very short but mine wasn’t. I’d known Gilbert during the war. He was in the RAF. A boy in blue fighting for this country just like Bernard and the blushing Morris” (116). Queenie openly opposes what Valeria Polopoli calls Britain’s “selective memory” (Polopoli 111), which is manifested through characters like Bernard and Mr. Todd.

Even though Queenie is definitely well-meaning, she is not free from racial prejudices. When she shows Hortense around in London, she tries to teach her about things and places related to shopping: “These are shops,” “This shop is called a grocer’s,” “This is bread” (330-2), things that she kindly keeps “teaching” even after Hortense tells her that she is familiar with them, they have the same shops in Jamaica (333). Later, when Hortense helps her give birth to her baby, Queenie tells her, giggling: “It’ll be like *Gone With the Wind*. You know the scene...,” comparing Hortense to a black slave girl (477). Her behaviour shows that her idea about coloured immigrants is just as stereotyped as that of Bernard; she treats Hortense as if she came from a jungle, and not from a civilized country. As a result, Hortense is repeatedly reminded of her otherness despite Queenie’s good intentions, making it seem impossible for her to ever feel that she truly belongs in her new homeland.

The other significant aspect of motherhood in *Small Island* is connected to Queenie’s mixed-race baby. Hiding her pregnancy and then giving the baby to the Jamaican couple show

that even though Queenie has a welcoming attitude towards coloured immigrants, she is not ready to leave behind her binary thinking and consider coloured British subjects her equals. She admits with tears in her eyes: “I haven’t got the spine. Not for that fight. I admit it, I can’t face it, and I’m his blessed mother” (521). Michael Perfect remarks that her unpreparedness is the reflection of Britain in 1948, which is equally unprepared for the task of integrating its colonial subjects (Perfect 39). Even though the present is not ready, the end of *Small Island* expresses hope for a brighter future through Bernard, who, surprisingly, tries to convince Queenie to keep the baby. When he looks at the new-born, it is finally not a race that he sees, but an individual. For him this is the first step in understanding that there is no collective Other, that every single person is a unique individual who should not be judged based on the colour of their skin. Levy herself states in an article that

Englishness must never be allowed to attach itself to ethnicity ... I am English. Born and bred, as the saying goes. (As far as I can remember, it is born and bred and not born-and-bred-with-a-very-long-line-of-white-ancestors-directly-descended-from-Anglo-Saxons.) ... being English is my birthright. England is my home. (“This Is My England”)

It is not only the baby, but also the father, Michael Roberts, who connects the two families. He is Hortense’s cousin and first love, but she and Queenie never realize that they both know him, being unaware of the fact that the mixed-race child is biologically related to both of them. This highlights two aspects of British society. On the one hand, it is a reminder of the interconnectedness of Britain and its colonies: mostly invisibly, but they have been present in each other’s lives for centuries, which makes it absurd to try to maintain pure, separate ethnic categories. Polopoli remarks that Levy uses the mixed-race baby “to embody the convergence of transracial histories in a national context and, consequently, to call into



question its cultural homogeneity. So, the baby symbolizes Levy's hope for a new generation marked by new transcultural forms of subjectivity and belonging" (Polopoli 112).

On the other hand, the invisibility of Michael also demonstrates the impact of one of the major sources of colonial prejudices and misunderstandings: a lack of communication. Michael unknowingly creates an intimate connection between two individuals and two races, and Perfect observes that it is the characters' "failure to speak to each other – a failure of conflicting voices to become dialogic voices – that leaves them ignorant of the interconnectedness and the interdependency of their experiences" (Perfect 39). The message that Levy conveys in her novel, thus, is that communication is an essential part of the process of dismantling the prejudices which prevent Britain from becoming a multicultural nation where everyone can feel at home. She says: "Saying that I'm English doesn't mean I want to be assimilated; to take on the majority white culture to the exclusion of all other ... And being English will not stop me from fighting to live in a country free from racism and social divisiveness" ("This Is My England"). Instead of considering assimilation the basis of peaceful coexistence, the key to the success of a multicultural nation is the acknowledgement of plural, fluid identities on the level of individuals. As identities are all unique, shaped by a given person's particular background and experiences, understanding them requires active engagement and communication.

### 3 Multicultural London in *White Teeth*

While *Small Island* focuses on questions of identity and belonging during the early stages of multiculturalism in Britain, *White Teeth* continues the story of Commonwealth immigrants and their descendants until the end of the twentieth century. By narrating the lives of several individuals from different ethnic backgrounds, Smith demonstrates the impossibility of thinking about race in an essentialist way. This chapter will demonstrate the diversity of attitudes among the different generations. While Samad, a first-generation immigrant who fought in the Second World War, finds it impossible to reconcile his Bengali identity with his English life, his young wife accepts cultural hybridity. However, they both fear the possibility of inter-racial marriages among their descendants, which would lead to the disappearance of their Bengali roots. As opposed to them, second-generation characters who were already born in London are ready to embrace Western culture. It shall be demonstrated that it is the essentialist views of their parents' generation and of the majority of white society which prevents them from developing a true sense of belonging, causing them to re-construct their identities as a means of defence against racial othering. Underlying these struggles, there is a strong sense of confusion about national identity among both the coloured and the white characters, resulting from the essentialist idea that "Englishness" can only be achieved through assimilation, rather than the acceptance of difference.

#### 3.1 Assimilation as Corruption

The English Archie and Bengali Samad's friendship demonstrates the possibility of conviviality and mutual respect among individuals from different cultures. Their first encounter during the Second World War can be considered a typical encounter between the colonizer and the colonized: Archie cannot help but stare at the Other, the unknown; his "relentless gaze" follows Samad for a whole week (83). However, when Samad breaks the

silence and starts talking to Archie, a friendship slowly develops between them. The narrator remarks:

it was precisely the kind of friendship an Englishman makes on holiday, that he can make only on holiday. A friendship that crosses class and color, a friendship that takes as its basis physical proximity and survives because the Englishman assumes the physical proximity will not continue. (96)

Apparently, the young Archie's initial behaviour shows the presence of some ingrained colonial prejudice, but Samad warns him against judging people on that basis: "withhold your judgment until all the facts are upon you. Because that land they call 'India' goes by a thousand names and is populated by millions, and if you think you have found two men the same among that multitude, then you are mistaken" (100). It is eventually this attitude which creates a deep bond between them, based on their shared experiences, and which leads to their reencounter in London nearly thirty years after the war.

Samad's story contains various instances of racial prejudice, discrimination, and the colonizer's ignorance about the different cultures that form the British Empire. For instance, during the war, the white soldiers call him "Sultan," even after he informs them that "It's not historically *accurate*, you know. It is not, even *geographically* speaking, accurate" (85). During this time he reaches a crisis similar to the "stranger in his own native land" described by Bipin Chandra Pal (qtd. in Anderson 93): "I see no future ... what am I going to do? Go back to Bengal? Or to Delhi? Who would have such an Englishman there? To England? Who would have such an Indian? They promise us independence in exchange for the men we were. But it is a devilish deal" (112). As he sees it, in exchange for everything that they got from the mother country, they had to give up their pure identity.

When Samad moves to England in 1974, he still feels the same tension between his "pure" Bengali identity and the English influence on it, which creates a fundamental

confusion in his self-image. He tries to lead a traditional Muslim life praying to Allah, regularly visiting the mosque, and living in an arranged marriage. On the other hand, his best friend, Archie, is a white atheist, who gets offended when his wife wants to cook curry for Samad's family: "For God's sake, they're not *those* kind of Indians ... Sam'll have a Sunday roast like the next man" (54). Indeed, in a way Samad is like "the next man," spending most of his free time with Archie in a pub. But in enjoying English company, habits and food, he sees the corruption of his Bengali identity: "When you get to my age, you become ... concerned about your faith ... I have been corrupted by England, I see that now – my children, my wife, they too have been corrupted" (144), adding that "I don't wish to be a modern man! I wish to live as I was always meant to! I wish to return to the East!" (145). He does not believe in assimilation, he considers any kind of deviation from Muslim tradition corruption, even though he himself has a hybridized identity.

Why does Samad find it impossible to reconcile his Muslim origins with his new English life? Despite taking great pleasure in his friendship with Archie, he cannot ignore the presence of racism around him. Similarly to Hortense in *Small Island*, he is an educated person who is discriminated against at work. Despite having a university degree, he has to work in his cousin's Indian restaurant, where he imagines wearing a placard which says "I AM NOT A WAITER. I HAVE BEEN A STUDENT, A SCIENTIST, A SOLDIER" (58). Knowing that he is nothing but a presumably uneducated Other in the white man's eyes – an Indian, a "Paki," no difference – makes him feel insignificant, frustrated and locked out of society. Moreover, Enoch Powell's influence is still strong in the mid-1970s, prompting the family to move to a more peaceful neighbourhood from Whitechapel, where they experienced racist violence: "that madman E-knock someoneoranother gave a speech that forced them into the basement while kids broke the windows with their steel-capped boots. Rivers of blood silly-billy nonsense" (62-3). In *Small Island*, the Jamaican couple copes with the exclusion

from the majority white culture by building a diasporic community, but Samad, having only Archie as a true friend, turns to tradition and the memory of his legendary great-grandfather, Mangal Pande. Deniz Kırpıklı observes that Samad creates an imagined community in his mind as a defence mechanism against assimilation and invisibility, according to which English and Bangladeshi cannot coexist. However, since he feels like he is too English to go back home, he idealizes his homeland which has become “a place of no return” (Kırpıklı 120, 123). Mangal Pande’s story is another aspect of this idealization (Kırpıklı 120). The man that most historians consider to be no more than a drunken traitor who could not even aim with his gun is seen as a real hero in his descendant’s eyes: “He is the tickle in the sneeze, he is why we are the way we are, the founder of modern India, the big historical cheese” (225-6). Due to the impossibility of uncovering Pande’s “*full story*” (252), the legend remains a fantasy where Samad can escape from the complexities of reality, just like the memory of his lost homeland.

Alsana and Clara have a much more liberal attitude towards life in Britain than Samad. Samad’s wife does not force herself to lead a strict Muslim life in the West; she accepts the inevitable changes which result from living in a culturally diverse environment. When Samad accuses her of not paying attention to her own culture, she reads out a section of the *Reader’s Digest Encyclopedia* which states that Bengalis are the descendants of Indo-Aryans and a number of indigenous groups who mixed thousands of years ago, warning Samad against thinking in essentialist categories: “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!” (236). Archie’s wife, Clara, also rejects essentialist views on race. She was raised by her mother as a Jehovah’s Witness, but she decides to abandon the church because she cannot understand how it is possible that only 144,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses will join Christ in heaven on Judgment Day (January 1, 1975), while damnation awaits millions of others: “to Clara, it was still an inequitable equation. Unbalanceable books” (39). Her

decision to abandon the church suggests that she is in favour of inclusion and equal chances rather than an exclusivist society which discriminates against those who are different.

Even though both wives reject religious fundamentalism and essentialist views on race, they do not completely embrace multiculturalism. One conviction that all three coloured parents have in common is the fear of the assimilation of their children. Clara feels sad and disappointed upon seeing that Irie adores “green-eyed Hollywood idols” and mostly has white friends: “Clara saw an ocean of pink skins surrounding her daughter and she feared the tide that would take her away” (328). Alsana is horrified by the thought of interracial marriages resulting in “unrecognizable great-grandchildren ... their Bengali-ness thoroughly diluted” (327). The narrator notes that this is “both the most irrational and natural feeling in the world,” resulting from the immigrants’ fear of “dissolution, *disappearance*” (327). However, it is only Samad who takes action in the matter. For him, it is not simply a fear of disappearance; he feels like his sons’ corruption is Allah’s punishment for his sins, and thus it is his responsibility to make things right: “I am hell-bound, I see that now. So I must concentrate on saving my sons” (189). Kırpıklı explains that “the problem with Samad and other characters with essentialist views is that they are unable to come to terms with the idea that one can be both English and Bengali. This kind of hybrid identity confuses Samad, so he tries to impose an assumed identity on his children” (Kırpıklı 121-2). Of course, his attempt fails, and the son he sends back to his roots in Bangladesh returns “more English than the English” (406), because Samad is reluctant to admit that Magid *is* English – “born and bred,” as Andrea Levy says (“This Is My Island”) – and has the right to embrace English culture.

### **3.2 “Strangers in Strange Lands”**

The struggles of second-generation immigrants are demonstrated through the characters of Irie, Millat and Magid. By following their development from childhood until late adolescence, Smith represents the fast changes that occurred in Britain in the second half of

the twentieth century as a result of globalization. As the narrator remarks, “Four months in the life of a seventeen-year-old is the stuff of swings and roundabouts ... Never again in your life do you possess the capacity for such total personality overhaul” (404). The three young characters’ confusion about their identity reflects the confusion of the society around them, and their repeated identity re-construction is like a dialogue between them and Britain. While certain things, for instance fashion and films, draw them towards Western culture, the impacts of racial othering make them question their Englishness and turn to their Jamaican and Bengali roots. The origin of othering is an essentialist understanding of national identity, and Kırpıklı observes that second-generation immigrants are “confused about the essentialist views of race, nation and cultural stereotypes, since they are not familiar with the cultural or national roots shared by their parents” (Kırpıklı 119). Even though they were born in a multicultural and multiracial environment during “the century of strangers, brown, yellow, and white” (326), their youth coincides with the administration of Margaret Thatcher, a period which Stuart Hall identifies as “a regression to a very defensive and highly dangerous form of national identity which is driven by a very aggressive form of racism” (“The Local and the Global” 26). In *White Teeth*, this controversial moment in society is described by the narrator:

despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other’s lives with reasonable comfort ... it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English. There are still young white men who are angry about that; who will roll out at closing time into the poorly lit streets with a kitchen knife wrapped in a tight fist. (327)

It is in this period of confusion that Irie, Millat and Magid grow up and attempt to find different ways of belonging and acceptance in multicultural London.

During her adolescence, Irie becomes conscious of the otherness of her appearance. She is “built like an honest-to-God Bowden” (266), having inherited the curvy figure of her

Jamaican grandmother, but society forces a different beauty ideal on her, that of the delicate and slim “English Rose” (267). Straightening her naturally curly hair and wearing tight clothes in order to hide her curves are Irie’s unsuccessful attempts to conform to what Hall defines as the essentialist national identity of “Englishness” which works by “excluding or absorbing” differences (“The Local and the Global” 22). Her inability to physically assimilate makes Irie feel alienated (Kırpıklı 124): “There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land” (266). Her example demonstrates the theory about the Other’s inferiority complex and the resulting “hallucinatory whitening” described by Fanon, whose aim as a psychoanalyst was to overcome this feeling of insignificance: “the black man should no longer be confronted by the dilemma, *turn white or disappear*; but he should be able to take cognizance of a possibility of existence” (Fanon 74-5). In the novel, there are coloured characters who have defeated this complex and remind Irie of her unique beauty, for example the Bengali Alsana’s liberal feminist niece and her girlfriend (283). They represent the global post-modern which “recognize[s] and absorb[s]” individual differences (“The Local and the Global” 28) instead of forcing assimilation, allowing the individual to enter the state of what Hall calls “the politics of living identity through difference,” where the complex and changing nature of one’s identity is recognized and embraced (“Old and New Identities” 57).

Irie, a sensitive and self-conscious teenager, is not ready to trust her own values and accept her uniqueness; instead, she blames her roots and projects her desires of Englishness to the Chalfen family. She sees the Chalfens as the exact opposite of her own “utterly dysfunctional” (515) family, which is full of past secrets emerging unexpectedly. She is enchanted by their intellectuality and the free flow of communication between parents and children “unblocked by history” (319). The narrator declares that Irie “wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfenishness. The purity of it,” immediately adding that they are



actually third-generation immigrants from Poland and Germany (328). The irony of the situation reveals Irie's confused understanding of national identity, associating Englishness with white skin and intellectuality. Her example highlights British society's misconception about Englishness, which is based on the binary oppositions of white and coloured, intellectual and savage, English and Other. To demonstrate this point, Kırpıklı remarks that while society accepts the white immigrant Marcus Chalfen as a scientist, the Bengali Samad's university degree in science is not taken seriously by anyone "because his identity is labelled as other" (Kırpıklı 125). Britain's political position concerning post-war immigration reflected the same attitude: while "labour was being sucked in from Ireland and Europe at a rapid rate," the government tried its best to restrict the inflow of coloured immigrants who were "not readily assimilable" (Spencer 19, 46).

After a while, however, Irie's character realizes that the Chalfens are far from a perfect family, which makes her move towards another way of identification, taking an interest in her Jamaican roots. Hall highlights the necessity of the rediscovery of one's roots in order to arrive at the state of living identity through difference: "We cannot conduct this kind of cultural politics without returning to the past but it is never a return of a direct and literal kind ... [The past] is always retold, rediscovered, reinvented" ("Old and New Identities" 58). However, Irie's reinvention of the past is a means of escaping history and reality instead of coming to terms with it. She sees Captain Durham, her white great-grandfather, as "handsome and melancholy ... looking every inch the Englishman," (400) even though in reality he was no more than a white captain who carelessly fell in love with a Jamaican girl, and then failed to take care of her. On the other hand, Irie does not wish to know this about the captain. In her imagination, Jamaica is like a newly discovered land with no history (402). Irie expresses her desire of a new beginning which would free her from the burden of a complicated past:

They open a door and all they've got behind it is a bathroom or a lounge. Just neutral spaces. And not 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 ... And every single fucking day is not this huge battle between who they are and who they should be, what they were and what they will be. (514-5)

By seeing characters like Samad who are trapped in their own histories, Irie wishes to completely reject the past, not yet realizing that facing it would be the best way to accept and overcome its complexities. The novel releases the tension of her confusion and helplessness to some extent by suggesting that she will travel to Jamaica with her grandmother to learn about her origins and finally embrace the Jamaican aspects of her identity (410, 541).

By creating a pair of twins, Magid and Millat, Smith highlights the impossibility of thinking about race in an essentialist way. In certain aspects, the Iqbal twins are the same: they look almost exactly like each other, and "*they're tied together like a cat's cradle*" (220, Smith's italics), with similar incidents happening to both of them even when they are far away from each other. In spite of their physical resemblance and special connection, an irreconcilable antagonism emerges between Magid and Millat, due to the opposing ideologies they embrace: science and religious fundamentalism. As children they are given the same opportunities and live in the same environment, and yet their personalities and interests are completely different. Magid has always been interested in science, which is also reflected in his style: at the age of nine, he already dresses "like some dwarf librarian" (134). Furthermore, he has always wished to be English, asking his classmates to call him Mark Smith instead of Magid Iqbal. His father disappointedly asks him: "Why are you always trying to be somebody you are not?" (150). Alsana is aware of the difference between generations, and tells her husband: "Let go, Samad Miah. Let the boy go. He is second

generation – he was born here – naturally he will do things differently” (289). Englishness for the young Magid is not a question of colour; it is the possibility for intellectual growth that he finds missing in his family:

Magid really wanted to be in *some other family*. He wanted to own cats and not cockroaches, he wanted his mother to make the music of the cello, not the sound of the sewing machine; he wanted to have a trellis of flowers growing up one side of the house instead of the ever-growing pile of other people’s rubbish ... he wanted his father to be a doctor, not a one-handed waiter ... (151)

Even though Samad is disappointed by Magid’s attitude, it is Magid he sends to Bangladesh with the intention of turning him into a true Muslim, and not the “good-for-nothing” Millat. However, his goal is not achieved, and eight years later Magid returns home with an even deeper interest in science and law, wanting “to enforce the laws of man rather than the laws of God” (406). As Magid explains in a letter to Marcus Chalfen, his belief in the power of science “*To make sense of the world [and] eliminate the random*” is a way of fighting against “*every passing whim of God*” (366, Smith’s italics). This way, the scientist takes control of the world, eradicating everything that can cause problems for humankind. Ironically, the end of the novel reveals that “Dr. Sick,” a French scientist who worked on the forced sterilization programme of the Nazis (119), is in the background of Marcus Chalfen’s science project, turning the FutureMouse into another representation of the desire for racial purity. Based on Appadurai’s definition of contemporary fundamentalism as a coping mechanism against the uncertainties of our globalized world, Benjamin Bergholtz points out that for Magid, science can be considered a fundamentalist coping mechanism through which he wants to find the same sense of certainty and security as Samad through Islam or Hortense through the church of the Jehovah’s Witnesses (Bergholtz 546, 550). However, he also emphasizes that any kind of fundamentalism is an “inadequate response to globalization

because its insistence on the inerrancy of a single narrative ... is incompatible with the ambiguity inherent in a pluralistic society” (Bergholtz 541). Following Bhabha’s remark on the influence of “[c]ounter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries” (148), the novel makes it obvious that not only “nation as a narrative strategy” but any kind of totalizing ideology is bound to fail, due to the diversity of the individuals who make up the community.

Millat repeats the moral struggles of his father, while trying to discover who he is and where he belongs. During his childhood and young adolescence, he is deeply interested in Western popular culture, for instance rock music, American gangster films, and Levi’s jeans (222). He is the typical bad boy who is adored by all his peers, but he is aware of racial prejudice in British society: “He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from ... he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country” (233-4). This is why he and his friends create the Raggastani street crew, which is described as “a hybrid thing: Allah *featured*, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being” (231). The crew fulfils two functions for them. Firstly, it is a collective defensive identity, “a hybrid thing,” because it includes individuals from different minorities, for example Jamaicans and Pakistanis, who have suffered discrimination and violence. By gathering in a group, they can protect themselves: “no one fucked with any of them any more because they looked like trouble” (232). Secondly, it is also a way to attract the attention of the white society which has oppressed their voice: “suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper” (234). This attitude is similar to the way Fanon describes the inferiority complex of the coloured man: “he is full of rage because he feels small, he suffers from an inadequacy in all human communication ... For him there is only one way out, and it leads into the white world. Whence his constant preoccupation with attracting the attention of the white man” (Fanon 35-6).

Millat attempts to find refuge in his Muslim roots by joining the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation, an Islamic fundamentalist community. The aim of KEVIN as “an extremist faction dedicated to direct, often violent action” (470) is to completely eradicate Western values from the lives of its members, practice a purely Muslim way of life, and publicly attack anything that goes against the teachings of Islam, for example Marcus Chalfen’s FutureMouse project. In connection with the erosion of nation states in the age of globalization, Hall remarks that ethnic minorities can also take up an exclusivist and defensive attitude when they feel threatened: “And at that point, local ethnicities become as dangerous as national ones. We have seen that happen: the refusal of modernity which takes the form of a return, a rediscovery of identity which constitutes a form of fundamentalism” (“The Local and the Global” 36). In Millat’s case, it is not the refusal of modernity but the feeling that modernity – which is associated with Western culture – refuses him, which turns him to religious fundamentalism. The paradox of desiring the products of modernity but living in a society that makes him feel like he cannot rightfully own those products is clearly visible in Millat’s attitude towards KEVIN. The narrator explains that Millat’s subconscious is “split-level”: on the one hand, he tries his best to adopt the value system of KEVIN because he really wants to belong there but, on the other hand, he finds it impossible to follow rule number four: “Purging oneself of the West” (444-5). Kırpıklı observes that KEVIN is “a performative act” for Millat, just like Islam for his father (Kırpıklı 127). In fact, most of its members have little interest in Muslim religion itself; they have joined the group to stand up against racism and violence together. Bergholtz points out that hybrid characters like Mo, a “Paki” who listens to Elvis (473), are the physical representations of the new and the uncertain emerging in our globalized world, to which certain white English individuals react with an aggressive form of racism (Bergholtz 548). The impossibility of the group to purge itself of the West is comically reflected in its acronym, KEVIN, a typical English name. The

fact that “They are aware they have an acronym problem” (301) shows the duality of the members’ attitude: they live in the West, Western culture is what they know and what they like, and yet they are forced to feel like it cannot belong to them, which makes them turn to their roots. However, in a way those are distant, indirect roots, which alone are inadequate to define their hybrid identities formed by a great diversity of social, cultural and individual influences.

### 3.3 Liberal Attitudes

There are a number of white characters in *White Teeth* who, despite appearing accepting and open-minded, constantly remind the coloured protagonists of their otherness. The music teacher, Poppy Burt-Jones, always talks about Samad’s family through racial stereotypes. She remarks that the Iqbal twins are not as quiet as Indian children usually are (134), and she is surprised to find out that Millat listens to Bruce Springsteen instead of traditional Indian music (156). Similarly, Joyce Chalfen imagines that Millat must have a marriage arranged for him simply because he is from a Muslim family (320), and considers the things she reads about other ethnicities in magazines general truths: “you read a lot about how Afro-Caribbeans seem to find it hard to establish long-term relationships. That’s terribly sad, isn’t it?” (322). Moreover, their stereotypical attitude soon turns to hypocrisy: Poppy starts a sexual relationship with the married Samad right after telling him how much she admires the self-restraint of his people (160), and it turns out that Joyce helps Irie and Millat because she needs somebody to “improve” and “cultivate,” as her own children are too old to need her (314-5). Bergholtz observes that the fundamental mistake in Joyce and Poppy’s attitude is that they “reduce the particularity of others to abstraction” and interpret them through the ideas they have about their cultures (Bergholtz 552-3). Their way of thinking prevents Poppy and Joyce from engaging in genuine interactions with coloured individuals in order to discover their own unique identities.

Among all the white characters, it is only Archie who treats everybody equally, without any kind of prejudice. He is described by the narrator as a dull person with “No aims, no hopes, no ambitions ... And yet... good. (48). Nick Bentley calls him “the unlikely hero of the book,” and highlights the importance of his habit to flip a coin to make decisions: “What stands in opposition to all these fundamentalisms is Archie’s flipped coin – his reliance on chance to determine his actions, rather than a fixed ideology” (Bentley 498). Archie might not be a man of great deeds or words, but his attitude can serve as an example for everybody else: “Archie was thinking again ... why couldn’t people just get on with things, just live together, you know, in peace or harmony or something. But he didn’t say any of that” (194). His simplicity makes him appear dull and even ignorant, but compared to the rest of the characters who look at the world through the filter of certain ideologies, it is exactly this simplicity that makes Archie noble. He accepts difference, and he never judges anybody or anything without personal experience. By presenting the utterly unheroic Archie as the hero, Smith demonstrates that ideologies – such as Islam for Samad, liberalism for Joyce or science for Marcus – always exclude those who do not conform to them, diminishing the chance for equality and living with difference.

## Conclusion

*Small Island* and *White Teeth* call for the rethinking of national identity by demonstrating the social changes which took place in London during the emergence of globalization and mass migration in the second half of the twentieth century. Levy's novel narrates the beginning of this process, which is characterised by a sharp contrast between expectations and reality regarding Commonwealth immigrants' settlement in the mother country, leading them to adopt "Identity Politics One," a collective defence mechanism. *White Teeth* fictionalizes London in later decades, focusing on the obstacles that prevent the coloured characters from arriving at the state of "living identity through difference." The novel depicts how second-generation immigrants with hybridized identities are perceived by white British society: they become the embodiment of the confusion and uncertainty arising from the social impact of globalization. In both novels, the lasting effects of colonial discourse and binary thinking destabilize the identity of the coloured characters, forcing them to reconsider their Britishness and find new ways of identification and belonging. However, a number of examples show that a true sense of belonging cannot be achieved through this type of forced identity re-construction.

As regards white British society, both novels depict a strong sense of confusion, prejudice and ignorance towards coloured immigrants. Direct encounters with the Other, who is imagined as inferior and uncivilized, often disrupt these stereotypes, resulting in either acceptance or an aggressive defence mechanism. Both novels exemplify the difficulty of overcoming the ingrained assumption of white superiority by presenting characters like the welcoming Queenie from *Small Island* and the liberal Joyce Chalfen from *White Teeth*, who, despite their good intentions, constantly remind the coloured characters of their otherness, making it impossible for them to become an integral part of British society. The fundamental error in the attitude of most white characters is that they think in abstractions and see the



coloured characters through stereotypes. In *Small Island*, Bernard's acceptance of the mixed-race baby suggests hope for a future where citizens are not categorized based on the colour of their skin. *White Teeth* demonstrates this unprejudiced attitude through Archie's character, who does not look at anyone through ideological filters. Instead, he believes in equal opportunities and the importance of thinking in terms of individuals rather than ethnicities. Both novels highlight the importance of abandoning essentialist views based on binary concepts, and demonstrate that racial equality and a state of "living identity through difference" can only be achieved through the understanding of Britain's colonial past, and, most importantly, through active engagement among individuals based on mutual respect and understanding, free from the stereotypes of any kind of belief system. As the Middle Eastern owner of Archie and Samad's favourite Irish pub says: "We're all English now, mate. Like it or lump it" (192).

### Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 2006.
- Bentley, Nick. "Re-Writing Englishness: Imagining the Nation in Julian Barnes's *England, England* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." *Textual Practice*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2007, pp. 483-504. *MLA International Bibliography with Full Text*, doi:10.1080/09502360701529093. Accessed 25 September 2018.
- Bergholtz, Benjamin. "'Certainty in Its Purest Form': Globalization, Fundamentalism, and Narrative in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2016, pp. 541-568. *Project MUSE*. muse.jhu.edu/article/664573. Accessed 25 September 2018.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Bonnici, Thomas. "Diaspora in Two Caribbean Novels: Levy's *Small Island* and Phillips's *A State of Independence*." *Revista de Letras*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2005, pp. 81-110. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26459843. Accessed 25 September 2018.
- Cowley, John. "Cultural 'Fusions': Aspects of British West Indian Music in the USA and Britain 1918-51." *Popular Music*, vol. 5, 1985, pp. 81-96. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/853284. Accessed 10 March 2019.
- Duboin, Corinne. "Contested Identities: Migrant Stories and Liminal Selves in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*." *Obsidian III*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2011, pp. 14-33. *HAL*, hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00796225/document. Accessed 10 March 2019.
- Evelyn, Kim. "Claiming a Space in the Thought-I-Knew-You-Place: Migrant Domesticity, Diaspora, and Home in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 78, no. 3-4, 2013, pp.129-149. *MLA International Bibliography with Full Text*,

web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=32&sid=94bc70b7-f44a-413c-b982-f724c1a33b77%40sessionmgr103. Accessed 25 September 2018.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto Press, 2008.

Hall, Stuart. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities." *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identities*, edited by Anthony D. King, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 41-68.

---. "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity." *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identities*, edited by Anthony D. King, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 19-40.

Johansen, Emily. "Muscular Multiculturalism: Bodies, Space, and Living Together in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2015, pp. 383-398. *MLA International Bibliography with Full Text*, doi:10.1080/00111619.2014.959644. Accessed 25 September 2018.

Kırpıklı, Deniz. "Non-Essentialist Conception of Migrant Identity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." *Interactions: Ege Journal of British and American Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1-2, 2017, pp. 117-128. *MLA International Bibliography with Full Text*, web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=8&sid=94bc70b7-f44a-413c-b982-f724c1a33b77%40sessionmgr103. Accessed 25 September 2018.

Levy, Andrea. *Small Island*. Headline Review, 2004.

---. "This Is My England." *The Guardian*, 19 Feb. 2000, www.theguardian.com/books/2000/feb/19/society1.

MacPhee, Graham. *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*. Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

- Perfect, Michael. “‘Fold the Paper and Pass It On’: Historical Silences and the Contrapuntal in Andrea Levy's Fiction.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2010, pp. 31-41. *MLA International Bibliography with Full Text*, doi:10.1080/17449850903478155. Accessed 3 October 2018.
- Polopoli, Valeria. “Narrating Nationhood: Constructed Identities in Andrea Levy’s *Small Island*.” *BrAS: British and American Studies/Revista de Studii Britanice și Americane*, vol. 21, 2015, pp. 109-116. *MLA International Bibliography with Full Text*, web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=30&sid=94bc70b7-f44a-413c-b982-f724c1a33b77%40sessionmgr103. Accessed 25 September 2018.
- Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*. Penguin Books, 2000.
- Spencer, Ian R. G. *British Immigration Policy Since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain*. Routledge, 1997.