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GENERATIONAL CONFLICT AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN ZADIE SMITH'S WHITE TEETH: MILLAT, MAGID AND THE SECOND GENERATION

Davronova Baxshanda Olimovna

Ingliz adabiyotshunosligi va tarjimashusonlik kafedrasi

Buxoro davlat universiteti, O'zbekiston

e-mail: bakhshandadavronova@gmail.com

Abstract. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) places the children of immigrants at the centre of its vision of late twentieth-century London. This paper examines how the novel represents the conflict between first-generation migrants and their British-born children, with particular attention to religious identity. The study focuses on the Bengali Muslim twins Millat and Magid Iqbal, whose divergent paths, one towards militant fundamentalism and the other towards secular rationalism, frustrate their father Samad's attempt to preserve faith and tradition. Their story is read alongside the experience of Irie Jones and Joshua Chalfen, which shows that intergenerational rupture is not limited to one ethnic or religious community. Drawing on Karl Mannheim's sociology of generations, Stuart Hall's conception of cultural identity as a process of "becoming", Homi Bhabha's notion of colonial mimicry, Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut's theory of segmented acculturation and Olivier Roy's account of neo-fundamentalism among Western-born Muslims, the analysis argues that Smith portrays religious identity in the second generation as an unstable, chosen and often performative construction rather than an inherited essence. The irony of the twins' fate shows that attempts to fix identity through control tend to produce the very outcomes they seek to prevent.

Keywords: Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, second generation, generational conflict, religious identity, fundamentalism, secularism, diaspora, mimicry

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Introduction

The problem of generations is one of the organising principles of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. The novel opens with the friendship of two Second World War veterans, the Englishman Archie Jones and the Bengali Muslim Samad Iqbal, but its emotional and ideological centre gradually shifts to their children, born in 1975 and raised in multicultural North London (Smith, 2001; Davronova, 2026, p. 49). As the narrator remarks, the parents of the novel's main families were all brought up in strict religious households where God was present at every meal (Smith, 2001, p. 77). Their children, by contrast, grow up among competing languages, faiths and youth cultures, and they inherit not a stable tradition but a set of questions about who they are.

Critics have long recognised that the novel's second generation complicates any simple celebration of multiculturalism. Seda Arikan (2013, p. 1679) observes that the many small stories about the characters' pasts make the novel a historical bond linking past, present and future, while Molly Thompson (2005) argues that the characters suffer less from a lack of belonging than from an "excess" of competing belongings. Dominic Head (2003) reads the second generation as the bearers of the novel's cautious hopes for a future multicultural Britain. What has received less systematic attention is the specifically religious dimension of this generational conflict.

The aim of this paper is to analyse how *White Teeth* represents the transmission and breakdown of religious identity between immigrant parents and their children. The central case is that of the twins Millat and Magid, whose opposite trajectories form one of the novel's sharpest ironies, but the analysis also considers Irie Jones and Joshua Chalfen in order to show that generational rebellion cuts across ethnic and religious boundaries. The paper develops observations first made in the author's monograph on Smith's novel (Davronova, 2026, pp. 24, 31, 55).

Methods

The following methods were applied in the course of the research:

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Theoretical and Analytical Method. The study combines the sociology of generations with postcolonial theory. Karl Mannheim's essay "The Problem of Generations" (Mannheim, 1952, pp. 276–322) provides the concept of a generation as a group shaped by shared formative experiences in youth. Stuart Hall's view that cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being" (Hall, 1990, p. 225) and Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry as a subject that is "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86) are used to interpret the twins' contrasting identities. Portes and Rumbaut's distinction between consonant, dissonant and selective acculturation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, pp. 52–54) and Olivier Roy's analysis of neo-fundamentalism among Western-born Muslims (Roy, 2004) help to explain the sociological logic behind the characters' choices.

Textual and Comparative Character Analysis. The paper uses close reading of key episodes and comparative analysis of paired characters: Millat and Magid, Samad and Alsana, Irie and her grandmother Hortense, Joshua and his father Marcus Chalfen. Attention is paid to narrative irony, focalisation and the use of symbolic doubling. Quotations from the novel follow the Penguin edition (Smith, 2001).

Socio-historical Method. The characters' experiences are placed in the context of British debates on multiculturalism, Muslim identity and integration in the 1980s and 1990s, including the controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), which the novel directly incorporates (Modood, 2007; Gilroy, 2004).

Analysis

The analysis is organised around three moments of the generational conflict: the father's attempt to control his sons' identity, the twins' inverted trajectories, and the wider pattern of rebellion that links the children of all three families.

1. Samad's Project: Faith, Fear and the Control of Identity

Samad Iqbal is the novel's most passionate defender of tradition. He defines himself emphatically as a Muslim, a man, a son and a believer, confident that he will

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"survive the last days" (Smith, 2001, p. 121), and he reproaches Archie for standing for nothing, neither a faith nor a politics nor even his own country (Smith, 2001, pp. 120–121). Yet Samad's own life constantly contradicts his principles. He is a university-educated man reduced to working as a waiter, he struggles with temptations he regards as sinful, and he is tormented by the suspicion that England has corrupted him. His fear for his sons is therefore also a fear about himself.

This anxiety crystallises when Samad realises how strongly the British school shapes his sons' beliefs. After the meeting at which he protests against the Harvest Festival, he resolves to save his children from losing their religion (Smith, 2001, p. 130; Davronova, 2026, p. 58). His solution is drastic: without his wife's knowledge he sends one of the twins, Magid, to Bangladesh to be brought up in the faith and culture of his ancestors, while Millat remains in London (Davronova, 2026, p. 49). Alsana's revenge, her refusal to give her husband a direct answer to any question for years, shows the cost of this decision for the family.

From the perspective of Portes and Rumbaut (2001, pp. 52–54), Samad's strategy is an attempt to impose consonance from above: to keep the children inside the parents' cultural world by cutting them off from the host society. The novel suggests that such control is doomed because identity, as Hall (1990, p. 225) insists, is not a fixed essence that can be preserved like an heirloom but a position continually constructed in history. Already at the age of nine, the narrator tells us, Magid had wanted to be called Mark Smith and to live in another family (Davronova, 2026, p. 53). The child's wish for an English name is a small but telling sign that the cultural boundary Samad wants to defend has already been crossed inside his own home.

2. The Inverted Twins: Fundamentalism and Secular Rationalism

The central irony of the novel lies in the inversion of the twins' destinies. Magid, the son sent to Bangladesh to become a good Muslim, returns as a polished, rational and thoroughly Anglicised young man who admires science and law and becomes the

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protégé of the Jewish geneticist Marcus Chalfen. Millat, the son left in London, becomes the family's religious radical. As the author's monograph summarises, one son joins radical Islamic groups while the other abandons his father's religion for science and scientific atheism (Davronova, 2026, p. 31). Samad's attempt to secure faith through geography thus produces exactly the opposite of what he intended.

Millat's path illustrates what Roy (2004) describes as the paradox of neo-fundamentalism among Western-born Muslims: radical religiosity arises not from deep immersion in a traditional culture but from its loss. Millat grows up as a charismatic street hero of North London, fascinated by gangster films and youth subculture, and he travels to Bradford to take part in the burning of *The Satanic Verses* without having read the book. He later joins KEVIN, the "Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation" (Isaacs, 2005), whose very acronym is a joke about its Western, improvised character. His fundamentalism is less a return to his father's faith than a performance of identity, a way of finding meaning, belonging and an answer to racism. In Portes and Rumbaut's terms, it is a product of dissonant acculturation, in which children outpace and reject parental authority while confronting discrimination on their own.

Magid embodies the opposite response. He is, to use Bhabha's formula, the colonial mimic who is "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86): more English in manners and convictions than the English themselves, yet still marked as other. His enthusiasm for Marcus Chalfen's FutureMouse project, a genetically engineered mouse whose future can supposedly be programmed, carries a heavy irony. Magid believes in scientific control of destiny just as fervently as Samad believed in religious control, and as the monograph notes, the parodic doubling of the twins expresses two opposed models of diasporic identity, radical and rational, which together reveal the fragmentation of the new generation (Davronova, 2026, p. 55). Both brothers, in different ways, reproduce their father's desire for certainty.

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Smith's narrative structure reinforces this ambivalence. The twins are repeatedly described as mirror images whose lives remain mysteriously connected despite the distance between London and Dhaka, and J. P. A. Sell (2006) argues that the novel replaces genetic and cultural determinism with chance and gesture as the true sources of identity. When the brothers finally meet again, their reunion brings not reconciliation but the recognition that neither the mosque nor the laboratory can guarantee a stable self. As the monograph observes, Magid, who begins as one of the novel's principal figures, gradually moves to the periphery of the narrative (Davronova, 2026, p. 36), while Millat's confusion becomes increasingly central.

3. Beyond the Iqbals: Irie, Joshua and the Shared Rebellion of the Second Generation

The generational conflict in *White Teeth* is not confined to the Muslim family. Irie Jones, the daughter of Archie and Clara and the granddaughter of the Jehovah's Witness Hortense Bowden, experiences a similar tension between inherited faith and personal choice. Clara has already rebelled against her mother's strict religious upbringing, and Irie, when she moves in with Hortense, encounters a closed world in which nothing in God's word ever changes (Smith, 2001, p. 389). Her reply that at school they study "the big three", Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and have done a month on Catholicism (Smith, 2001, p. 391), shows that for her generation religion has become an object of comparative study rather than a binding tradition.

Joshua Chalfen offers a striking parallel from the secular, liberal side of the spectrum. Raised by rationalist parents who believe they represent the most enlightened model of English family life, Joshua rebels against his father by joining FATE, a militant animal-rights group, and turning against Marcus's genetic experiments. His radicalism mirrors Millat's: both young men find in a militant collective the moral certainty that their families cannot provide. Smith thus suggests that the second generation's turn to ideology is a general feature of modern youth rather than a cultural

pathology of Muslims, a point that resonates with Modood's (2007, pp. 87–116) critique of essentialist views of minority cultures.

The novel's climax brings all these lines together. On the last night of 1992, at the public presentation of FutureMouse, KEVIN, FATE and Hortense's Jehovah's Witnesses converge on the same hall, each convinced of possessing the truth about the future. Millat aims a gun at Marcus, and it is Archie, the indecisive member of the older generation, who steps into the line of fire. Irie, meanwhile, is pregnant by one of the twins, and the impossibility of knowing which brother is the father becomes the novel's final image of identity that cannot be traced to a single root. As the monograph concludes, the formation of identity among second-generation characters such as Magid, Millat, Clara and Irie is shown as a complex and contradictory process that can intensify personal crisis (Davronova, 2026, pp. 84–85). At the same time, Irie's unborn child, free from the obsession with roots, embodies a fragile hope that the next generation may live beyond the battles of the past (Head, 2003; Gilroy, 2004).

Conclusion

In conclusion, *White Teeth* presents generational conflict as one of the defining experiences of multicultural Britain and links it directly to the question of religious identity. Samad Iqbal's attempt to protect his sons from assimilation by sending Magid to Bangladesh exemplifies a first-generation strategy that seeks to fix identity through control. The novel's ironic reversal, in which the son raised in Bangladesh becomes an English rationalist and the son raised in London becomes a militant fundamentalist, demonstrates that religious identity in the second generation is not inherited automatically but chosen, constructed and often performed. Millat's fundamentalism, read through Roy's theory, appears as a product of Westernisation rather than its opposite, while Magid's rationalism, read through Bhabha's notion of mimicry, reveals the limits of assimilation. The parallel cases of Irie Jones and Joshua Chalfen show that rebellion against parents and attraction to militant certainties cut across ethnic, religious

and secular families alike. Smith therefore rejects both nostalgic essentialism and naive faith in integration. Her novel suggests that the only viable identity for the new generation is an open one, shaped by chance, choice and coexistence rather than by the obsessive search for pure roots.

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