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BIBLICAL INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE CRISIS OF CHRISTIAN TRADITION IN ZADIE SMITH'S WHITE TEETH

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Abstract. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) is usually discussed as a novel about race, migration and hybridity, but its representation of religion has received far less attention. This paper explores how Smith uses biblical allusion, quotation and stylisation to reflect on the place of Christianity in a secular and multicultural Britain. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality, Gérard Genette's typology of transtextual relations, Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody and sociological accounts of secularisation, the study analyses three groups of episodes: Samad Iqbal's parodic imitation of King James English during a school debate on the Harvest Festival; the friendly dispute between Clara and Alsana over the shared Abrahamic story; and the sectarian faith of Hortense Bowden, a Jehovah's Witness awaiting the end of the world, together with the colonial Christianity that shaped her family history. The analysis demonstrates that Smith's biblical intertexts function as a source of complex humour, a means of interfaith dialogue and an instrument of critique directed at both hollow ritual and religious exclusivity. The paper contributes to the study of religion, intertextuality and postmodern poetics in contemporary British fiction.

Keywords: Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, intertextuality, Bible, parody, Christianity, secularisation, religious identity, postmodernism

Introduction

Religion occupies a surprisingly central place in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Each of the novel's families carries its own religious inheritance: Samad Iqbal struggles to remain a faithful Muslim in London, Clara Bowden grows up as a Jehovah's Witness

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under the strict guidance of her mother Hortense, and the secular, rationalist Chalfens represent a liberal culture in which faith has become largely irrelevant. As the narrator observes, all three families were raised in strict religious households where God was present at every meal (Smith, 2001, p. 77). The novel's London is thus not only a meeting place of races and languages but also a space where several religious traditions coexist with an increasingly secular majority culture.

At the same time, Western Christianity is the tradition against which most of the characters measure themselves. The language of the King James Bible, Christian festivals, missionaries and church congregations appear throughout the text, often in an ironic light. This raises the question of what remains of Christian culture in a society where, to use Grace Davie's well-known formula, many people continue "believing without belonging" or, increasingly, belonging without believing (Davie, 1994; Bruce, 2002). Northrop Frye (1982) famously described the Bible as the "great code" of Western literature, and Smith's novel tests how far this code is still legible to a multicultural readership.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the biblical intertextuality of *White Teeth* and to show how Smith uses it to depict the crisis of Christian tradition in contemporary Britain. The study argues that the novel neither simply rejects nor nostalgically defends Christianity. Rather, it uses biblical language parodically to expose the gap between religious form and social practice, and it contrasts the closed, exclusive faith of sectarian believers with the open, friendly dialogue that becomes possible when characters recognise their shared scriptural heritage. The paper develops material from the third chapter of the author's monograph (Davronova, 2026, pp. 57–81).

Methods

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

Theoretical and Analytical Method. The study is based on the theory of intertextuality. Julia Kristeva's claim that every text is built as a mosaic of quotations

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and is the absorption and transformation of another text (Kristeva, 1980, p. 66) provides the general framework. Gérard Genette's classification of transtextual relations, including quotation, allusion, parody and pastiche (Genette, 1997, pp. 1–7), is used to distinguish the different ways in which biblical material enters the novel. Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as repetition with critical distance (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 6) and her concept of historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 5) help to explain the ironic function of these borrowings.

Textual and Stylistic Analysis. The paper uses close reading of dialogues and narratorial passages in which biblical quotations, allusions and archaic stylisations appear. Particular attention is given to the grammar and vocabulary of King James English, to the juxtaposition of high religious register with everyday colloquial speech, and to the comic effects that this contrast produces. Quotations from the novel follow the Penguin edition (Smith, 2001); biblical references follow the Authorized King James Version.

Contextual and Sociological Method. The religious episodes of the novel are interpreted in the context of secularisation in Britain and Europe and of contemporary debates about the future of Christianity in a continent transformed by immigration (Davie, 1994; Bruce, 2002; Jenkins, 2007). The sociological concept of "moralistic therapeutic deism" (Smith & Denton, 2005, pp. 162–171) is used to characterise the diluted, ethical rather than doctrinal religiosity that surrounds the novel's characters.

Analysis

The analysis focuses on three functions of biblical intertextuality in *White Teeth*: parodic stylisation as a critique of empty ritual, shared scripture as a ground for interfaith friendship, and sectarian quotation as a sign of religious exclusivity linked to colonial history.

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1. Parodic Stylisation: Samad and the Harvest Festival

One of the most memorable religious scenes in the novel takes place at a meeting of parents and governors at the children's school, where the annual Harvest Festival is discussed. Samad, who takes religious festivals extremely seriously, objects that the Harvest Festival is not a Christian holiday at all and asks where in the Bible it is written that a child must take food from his parents' cupboards to the school assembly (Smith, 2001, p. 130). He formulates his objection in a mock-biblical imperative, using the archaic forms "thou must" and "thou shalt" of the King James translation, and he even asks whether such customs are not simply pagan ideals.

In Genette's terms, Samad's speech is not a quotation but a pastiche: it imitates the style of a hypotext without reproducing any actual verse (Genette, 1997, pp. 1–7). The comic effect arises from the collision of the solemn biblical register with trivial details of modern school life, such as frozen fish fingers and a loaf baked in the shape of a fish. At the same time, the parody carries a serious argument. Using the dominant culture's own sacred language, Samad exposes the distance between Christian ritual and its contemporary secular practice. This is precisely the "critical distance" that Hutcheon (1985, p. 6) identifies as the essence of parody.

The reply Samad receives confirms his suspicion. A teacher frankly admits that the school prefers to think of such occasions as being more about community than about religion (Smith, 2001, p. 130), and she remarks elsewhere that she would happily remove Christmas from the calendar altogether if she could. For Samad this answer is no comfort, and he exclaims that the community has become man's god. The episode illustrates what sociologists have called the transformation of Christianity into a vague civic and moral framework, close to the "moralistic therapeutic deism" in which God remains in the background while being a good person is what matters (Smith & Denton, 2005, pp. 162–163). The Czech theologian Dan Drápal (2018) applies the same concept critically to European Christianity, and Smith's scene can be read as a literary

embodiment of this diagnosis: the festival survives as a pleasant school custom, but its religious meaning has disappeared.

2. Shared Scripture and Interfaith Dialogue: Clara, Alsana and the Story of Abraham

Not all religious encounters in the novel are polemical. Before the birth of their children, the young wives Clara and Alsana discuss possible names. Clara, who still carries the biblical knowledge of her Jehovah's Witness upbringing, mentions that Archie likes the name Sarah and that it was good enough for Abraham's wife (Smith, 2001, p. 75). Alsana instantly corrects her, insisting that the patriarch should be called Ibrahim and adding that Sarah gave birth at a hundred years old by the grace of Allah (Smith, 2001, p. 75).

The allusion is to the Genesis narrative of Abraham and Sarah, who receive the promise of a son, Isaac, in their old age, a story recognised in Judaism, Christianity and Islam alike. The narrator makes clear that Alsana's correction arises more from instinct than from Qur'anic pedantry: it is a spontaneous claim to cultural ownership rather than a theological dispute. What is important is the tone of the exchange. The two women briefly touch the boundary between their traditions, yet the difference does not threaten their friendship. In this scene the biblical intertext works not as a marker of division but as a shared cultural memory, and it anticipates the novel's broader suggestion that understanding between cultures begins with recognising what people have in common (Trimm, 2016).

A similar softening function is performed by humorous biblical allusions in everyday speech. Describing the death of a boastful soldier during the war, the narrator remarks that Private Mackintosh, for all his big talk, had soiled himself at St Peter's Gate (Smith, 2001, p. 93). Later, after Archie's failed suicide attempt, Clara tells him in her Jamaican English that he looks good for someone who has come so close to St Peter's Gate (Smith, 2001, p. 25). The image of St Peter guarding the gate of heaven,

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rooted in Matthew 16:19 and popular Christian tradition, is here detached from solemn eschatology and fused with colloquial idiom. As a result, death and despair are approached through laughter, which, according to Smith's own remarks on her style, reflects the "messy complexities of the human heart" rather than a controlled, single register (Smith, 2003).

3. Sectarian Exclusivity and Colonial Christianity: Hortense Bowden

The most intense religious figure in the novel is Hortense Bowden, Clara's mother and a devoted Jehovah's Witness. Unlike Samad's parody, Hortense's speech is full of direct biblical quotations with exact references. Speaking of the effort required to come close to Jehovah, she cites the Beatitude that the pure in heart shall see God and adds the reference, Matthew 5:8 (Smith, 2001, p. 30). Clara's youth group is similarly taught the necessity of separating the sheep from the goats, an allusion to Matthew 25:31–46 (Smith, 2001, p. 34). The habit of naming book, chapter and verse signals not only knowledge but authority and exclusivity: for Hortense, only Jehovah saves (Smith, 2001, p. 29), and most of humanity has already sinned too much to be rescued.

Smith treats this sectarian certainty with gentle but unmistakable irony. In 1974 Hortense prepares for the end of the world, which she has marked in blue in the household calendar for 1 January 1975, and she frames the printed announcement of the apocalypse and places it proudly on the television between a glass Cinderella and a cloth embroidered with the Ten Commandments (Smith, 2001, p. 32). The juxtaposition of eschatological terror and kitsch domestic decoration is both comic and disturbing. When the prophecy fails, Hortense is nevertheless ready to believe again that the apocalypse is near, quoting the promise that "this generation shall not pass" (Matthew 24:34), which her sect applied to the generation of 1914 (Hewitt, 2007, p. 35). The novel thus shows how scripture can be appropriated to sustain fear and control, and how a closed system of interpretation resists every disconfirmation.

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The roots of Hortense's faith are revealed only near the end of the novel, in the story of her mother Ambrosia in colonial Jamaica. The narrator ironically lists the subjects that the English officer Captain Durham undertakes to teach the girl: letters, numbers, the Bible, English history and trigonometry, followed by a much longer lesson in "anatomy" (Smith, 2001, p. 357). Behind the language of education and moral improvement lies sexual exploitation, and the novel's bitter aphorism that the English want to teach and steal from you at the same time (Smith, 2001, p. 356) condenses the hypocrisy of colonial Christian paternalism. Ambrosia is eventually drawn neither to the Anglican nor to the Methodist church but to the Jehovah's Witnesses through a fiery Scottish missionary who promises to take her to "the Truth" (Smith, 2001, p. 359). As Seda Arikan (2013) notes, the search for roots in the novel repeatedly uncovers histories that are far from pure, and here the very origin of Hortense's zeal lies in colonial violence.

The consequences of this exclusivity are felt by the next generations. Clara cannot sustain her mother's rigorous standards and gradually turns to the secular world, while Irie, questioning the meaning of life, receives from Hortense the advice that nothing in God's word changes and that only people are mistaken (Smith, 2001, p. 389). When Hortense asks whether Irie's school teaches her the only true church, Irie answers that they study "the big three", Jews, Christians and Muslims, and that they did a month on Catholicism (Smith, 2001, p. 391). The innocent remark, which separates Catholicism from Christianity as if it were a fourth religion, reveals the fragmented and superficial religious literacy of the younger generation. Between the sectarian certainty of the grandmother and the vague eclecticism of the granddaughter, the novel locates the crisis of Christian tradition in contemporary Britain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, biblical intertextuality in *White Teeth* is far more than decorative allusion. Smith uses the Bible in at least three distinct ways. First, through Samad's

pastiche of King James English, she parodies the empty survival of Christian ritual in secular institutions and shows that festivals such as Harvest have become community customs detached from faith. Second, in the conversation between Clara and Alsana about Abraham and Sarah, scripture functions as a shared heritage that permits friendly dialogue between Christian and Muslim characters, while humorous references to St Peter's Gate soften the treatment of death and despair. Third, through Hortense Bowden and the story of Ambrosia, Smith exposes the dangers of religious exclusivity and the complicity of colonial Christianity in exploitation. These findings confirm that intertextuality, in Kristeva's and Genette's sense, is a key structural principle of Smith's postmodern poetics and that her irony is directed not at faith as such but at its hollow, coercive or hypocritical forms. The novel thus portrays a Britain in which the "great code" of the Bible is still present but increasingly fragmented, and suggests that genuine coexistence depends on recognising common human and spiritual ground rather than on claiming exclusive possession of the truth.

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