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Remapping Identity and Selfhood: Multiculturalism and Plurality in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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Among the numerous literary trends that have found its place in Contemporary English Literary Canon, issues relating to diaspora studies have generated interest in scholars and readers. There has been restructuring of the literary canon in recent times that have included disciplines as history, philosophy, gender studies, media studies and so on under its framework. In diaspora studies there has been a considerable attempt to locate themes such as identity crisis and maladjustment. However, this paper shall on the other hand locate how the process of immigration and settlement in a First World country like Britain might offer possibilities of redefinition of selfhood. For this purpose the paper shall contextualize on the two novels, *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali and *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith. My argument in this paper shall be to highlight how the multicultural society in which the characters inhabit and physical as well as the cultural displacement that they undergo due to immigration offer them with possibilities of plural and fluid identities. The initial resistance that the characters endure and the people they interact with problematize in different ways the space they inhabit and help them emerge as independent beings. Their individualities are in a continuous process of negotiation and self questioning and through this process the characters finally succeed to arrive at an identity that is almost complete in itself. The present paper shall study how the novels create the 'third space' by presenting a dynamic representation of identity in contemporary British society. The paper shall conclude with the note of optimism reflecting how immigration to a foreign land might offer alternative means of self expression as reflected in the above mentioned novels.

In order to represent how identities are remapped when posited in multicultural post-war Britain, the fictional works this paper shall discuss are Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). Both the novels deal with immigration related issues, yet in a manner that has not been done earlier in Diaspora Studies. Instead of focusing on the problems relating immigration such as maladjustment and discrimination, the novels highlight how immigration might offer possibilities of re-defining oneself. Liz Bondi points out that there is a direct relation between identity and space, arguing "who am I?" depends on "Where am I?" (1993:85). The notion of an individual subject as fixed stable identities come to be questioned with postmodern and poststructuralist theories that viewed individual subject in a process of continuous formation. Chris Weedon in *Identity and Culture* (2004) argued for the need to redefine the "current norms of Britishness". He argues that "a sense of national identity" based on generalizations involves a "selective and simplified account" of a complex history. Much that is ignored, disavowed or simply forgotten" (Parekh 2000: 16, quoted in Weedon 30) must be taken into account. The novels under analysis in this essay portray such a British society where identities are, as in Bhabha's words "hybrid" (1990: 211). Any attempt at homogenizing them into a category shall meet with failure. Cultures, according to McDowell and Sharp, "are fluid and temporary social constructions, made and remade over time" and are in a process of formation that involves "the remapping of cultural identities and practices for *all* those involved" (1997: 210; emphasis in the original).

Monica Ali, the author of *Brick Lane*, is born on 20 October 1967 in Dhaka, East Pakistan. She was born to a Bangladeshi father and English mother, moving to Boston, England at the age of three, where she was raised. There she studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Wadham College, Oxford. She was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 2003 and also voted Granta's Best of Young British Novelists on the basis of the unpublished manuscript. The other novelist Zadie Smith was born on October 25, 1975 in London. Zadie Smith was born to a Jamaican mother and an English father and grew up in a working class part of North West London. In college she published several short stories and her first novel *White Teeth* won numerous literary prizes including the 2000 Whitbread Book Award and the Guardian First Book Award.

White Teeth, with its North-west London setting, presents a multiracial, multicultural society with immigrants from different cultural and religious backgrounds, and *Brick Lane* posits East London as its setting with a reflection on the lives of Bangladeshi immigrants. Both the novels attempt to explore plurality in terms of identity. Ali's novel *Brick Lane* focuses on the Bangladeshi immigrant population in the second half of the 20th century. The narrative develops around Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who migrates to London after an arranged marriage to an expatriate Chanu. During the initial years, Nazneen's contact with the outside world was almost negligible. Like any other woman, she remained confined with domestic chores. Moreover her lack of knowledge in English was restricted to two words "sorry" and "thank you" (2003:14). At this point homesickness, loneliness added with her pregnancy made Nazneen long for her native land Gouripur, in East Pakistan. According to Weedon (2008), in *Brick Lane*, "as in many diasporic texts, dreams and memories of the lost homeland play a positive role in securing identity and survival" (27). Having limited access to social spaces in London, Nazneen felt secluded and was lost in memories of her life in Gouripur. However, her failure in preventing the death of her first son traumatized her constantly and she was sick of her helplessness. She feels empowered for the first time in London when she moves out from her house into the streets and communicates successfully to a stranger in English (61). Karim's sudden entry into her life adds to this feeling of empowerment. Through him Nazneen gains entry into public sphere completely. In the meetings she feels empowered when casting votes. She also takes up sewing in order to have economic independence. Finally she is able to resist Chanu's decision to return to Dhaka. Asserting her wish strongly, Nazneen refuses to return and forsakes herself from her male counterpart, be it Chanu or Karim. Being exposed to such a multicultural society that permits its woman to freely move out into social spheres, Nazneen finds an identity that is not dependent on anyone. The novel ends at the point where Nazneen fulfils her dream of ice-skating. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman draws attention to the fact that "the problem of identity" is a modern phenomenon in that it is brought about by the disassociation of the concept of birth and nation as a once single cause-effect factor (2004: 24). For Bauman we are all living in "liquid modernity" characterised by a lack of stability and radical change. In such a life setting, "identities are perhaps the most common, most acute, most deeply felt and troublesome incarnations of ambivalence" (32). Ethnically diverse authors born in Britain experience this disassociation and this ambivalence even more since they occupy an in-between space where traditional cultural representations of Britain fail to encompass their 'hybrid' identity. In some respects, following Bauman's postulates, their identity status has to be seen as located in a continuum of opposed forces of belonging and exclusion (77).

Contrary to Nazneen, her husband Chanu is represented suffering from maladjustment. Being tired of tolerating discrimination he decides to return to Dhaka. He finds himself alien in

foreign land and fails to connect to the adopted country. Moreover, the change that he sees in his two daughters made him shiver and he began feeling outsider in his own family. Iris Marion Young argues that nowadays space can no longer be equated with a single and homogenised community, and at the same time that the idea of community cannot be associated with a single or homogenous identity (1990: 153). Both space and identity have become complex categories being influenced by divergent factors at the same time. The novel also reflects how apart from the external differences in opinion there are internal differences as well. No matter how much Chanu tries to force his daughters to learn Bengali and Tagore's songs, they did not want to listen to Bengali classical music, wore jeans and hated Salwaar kameez. Second generation immigrants epitomized by Nazneen's teenage daughters Shahana and Bibi or Razia's children Tariq and Shefali reflect an entirely different perspective of immigrant experience. Contrary to the first generation immigrants, these youngsters enjoy the liberties that London offers them. Their assimilation and negotiation into the British culture offer them possibilities of exploring themselves in a different manner. Moreover, Chanu's observation on his difference from the other Bangladeshi immigrants, and his similarity with the educated Dr. Azad reflects how even among the first generation immigrants there are variations. Chanu criticizes the existence of a homogenized view of all Asians in the British collective imaginary. He asserts his difference by claiming:

‘I am forty years old’ . . . I had ambitions. Big dreams . . . And then I found things were a bit different. These people here didn't know the difference between me, who stepped of an aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads. (Ali 2003: 34)

The novel also reflects on the aftermath of the September 11 attack in Britain. After this epoch making event the Muslim immigrants were viewed with suspicion and Karim in *Brick Lane* stands for such a figure who takes up the path of religious fundamentalism in order to express his resentment against such discriminatory practices. *Brick Lane* highlights how identities undergo a process of remapping when posited in a foreign land. The liberties that the women as Nazneen, Razia and Mrs. Azad and their children enjoy empower them to come out free from the societal constraints and emerge as independent beings. Nevertheless, the menfolk represented through Karim and Chanu are shown to be on the two extremes sides: one forsaking British culture permanently and the other taking the path of religious fundamentalism.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* on the other hand sheds light on more complex aspects of immigration. Smith's novel also deals with the first generation immigrants and their children represented through Samad, Clara and Alsana, and Irie, Millat and Magid respectively. However, in *White Teeth* there is complexity in the ways Smith addresses these issues because the characters belong to mixed ethnicities. For example, Irie has Jamaican mother and English father. Magid, Samad's son who is born in North-West London is sent to Bangladesh to know his actual roots, since Samad actually belonged to East Bengal. However, Smith debunks the notion of identity based on binaries from the very beginning categorized as blacks and whites. Instead the novel emphasizes on the multiplicity of identity formation in post war London.

The multicultural London presented in *White Teeth* spans from the aftermath of the Second World War until the year 1999. During these years, Britain underwent crucial social changes that affected and were reflected in the organization of social spaces. Instead of harping on the problems pertaining to immigration, *White Teeth* attempts to celebrate the outcome of such events: “this has been the century of the great immigrant experiment” (Smith

2000: 326). In this sense, the social spaces of interaction depicted in the novel offer opportunities of constant re-definition of self. The beginning of the novel reverberates how the present multicultural, multiracial London incorporates the immigrant as an indispensable category. The fact that Archie Jones, a white-British is saved from suicide attempt by the timely help from Mo Hussein-Ishmael, an Asian Muslim immigrant who owns a halal butcher's shop brings out the novel's optimism. Archie's personal life runs parallel to the changes that afflict the British society after the Second World War. During his fighting in the war Archie encounters 'the other' for the first time in the character of Samad Iqbal and establishes a long-lasting friendship with him. It is through the deep bonding that these two men share that they learn to accept each other. Moreover, the place where they meet, the O'Connell's Pool House, is in itself hybrid, neither "Irish nor a pool house" (Smith 2000:183).

White Teeth debunks the notion of uniformity of selfhood and examines how social spaces one inhabits and interactions one undergoes become important in determining one's identity. The novel depicts the plight of three families: the Chalfens, the Iqbals and the Joneses. Though initially the Chalfens are represented as the white, educated and upper-middle class, yet the narrative gradually explores how each of the families are flawed and the members attempt to carve an identity for themselves. Nevertheless, the novel clearly demarcates the difference in experience between the first generation immigrants and their children. All of them are displaced and try to find their own spaces within their families and within society. First-generation characters in the novels under analysis suffer an undeniable diasporic experience due to immigration: they undergo physical dislocation when they leave their countries of origin to come to Britain. However, though the second-generation characters may not have undertaken a diasporic journey, but they inhabit a border space, a hybrid space, a "third space" (Bhabha 1990: 112) that can be defined as "multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries" (Brah 1996: 194), these offsprings emulate hybrid identities. This also affects the white British population that is forced by new social circumstances to meet Black and Asian immigrants for the first time in their national territory. Feelings of spatial dislocation, dis/encounters with their most immediate community or their family and the need to negotiate a different sense of identity within their own spatial location permeate these two novels and are common to all the characters to different degrees. Moreover, these ethnically diverse characters are compelled to find their own spaces in a geographical and national frame that for long was constructed only in 'white' terms.

Ali's and Smith's novels not only depict characters who have suffered a direct diasporic experience related to British colonial history such as Nazneen in *Brick Lane*, Samad in *White Teeth* but also represents the second generation immigrants who feel completely lost in an alien country yet cannot relate to the country to which their parents actually belong, and hence feel the need for self introspection. In this sense, the British-born Shahana, Bibi in *Brick Lane*, and Irie, Millat and Magid in *White Teeth* are forced to re-define their identity status within an imaginary community (Anderson 1983). Samad, like Chanu in *Brick Lane* frustrates himself desperately trying to make his twin sons Magid and Millat learn about their Bangladeshi roots. Samad's disappointment with England and its effect on his children is clear when he expresses his own feelings of inbetweenness and estrangement to Irie:

There are no words. The one I send home comes out a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer. The one I keep here is fully paid-up green bow-tie-wearing fundamentalist terrorist. I sometimes wonder why I bother

... I really do. These days, it feels to me like you make a devil's pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, get yourself statted ... but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? Cold, wet, miserable; terrible food, dreadful newspapers - who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house trained ... it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere. (407)

Just like Irie, Millat and Magid, Samad too suffers from a feeling of in-betweenness. Samad not only suffers from physical dislocation but also feels alienated from his sons because he is unable to connect to them. He is unable to form a meaningful relationship with them because they emulate identities contrary to his expectations. In an effort to come to terms with his fragmented identity, and adjust to his new life in England, he sends Magid to Bangladesh to be well equipped with his native culture. However, even Magid disappoints him when he returns to London being English in his nature as well as education. Disappointed with Magid's attitude, Samad is equally appalled with Millat's involvement in KEVIN because it conforms to the Western cliché of a Muslim terrorist. Although it seems Samad would welcome Millat embracing Islam, ironically, Samad views involvement with such an organization as particularly English; "in Britain, such militant religious youth groups thrive partly by virtue of the very cultural values they denounce" (Head 2003:113). Samad's home country, adopted country and his family all become alien to him. Halbwachs notes that "the greatest number of memories come back to us when our parents, our friends, or other persons recall them to us . . . it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (38). Smith articulates this predicament of the immigrant figure when she writes: ". . . immigrants have always been particularly prone to repetition – it's something to do with that experience of moving from West to East or East to West or from island to island. Even when you arrive, you're still going back and forth; your children are going round and round" (White Teeth 161). Alsana, Samad's wife suffers like her husband in an alien land to which she cannot connect, unlike Nazneen in *Brick Lane* who uses the opportunities she gets in London to her advantage. Being aware of what her sister Hasina underwent in Bangladesh, Nazneen looked forward to her adopted country in a positive manner. Contrary to Nazneen, Alsana suffered from guilty conscience residing in the country that caused suffering to her loved ones. She fails as a mother in being unable to connect to her sons or to understand their pains. Maria Cristina Paganoni in her internet article "Zadie Smith's New Ethnicities" (2003) describes the difference in experience of the first generation immigrants and their children, saying that former experience "the trauma of eradication and displacement", while the latter have to deal with "the inevitable act of emancipation from the colonial past". These separate challenges make communication almost impossible between the children and their parents.

In such situation, the children in *White Teeth* represented through Irie, Millat and Magid look back to their Jamaican and Bangladeshi roots respectively to trace their origin. However, the novel shows how the second generation immigrants celebrate these contested spaces they get exposed to and emerge as individuals possessing fluid identities. Their constant negotiation with the two opposed cultures they inhabit, one physically and the other psychologically influence them in such a manner that they cannot be categorized as homogeneous ones. Their individual differences are strikingly brought out through Irie, Magid and Millat, all of whom undergo different paths of self discovery. Millat turns out to be a religious fundamentalist like Karim of *Brick Lane*, Magid turns to be an Englishman, and Irie delves into her mother's Jamaican roots to find a stable identity. However, ironically, the novel reflects

how efforts of arriving at fixed stable notions of identity is an impossible effort, because the lives of the second generation immigrant children have innumerable threads, sometimes which are unfeasible to be actually traced.

However, Smith's and Ali's novel represents this experience as normal and intrinsic part of immigration and the text tries to build up spaces through the narrative through which immigrants can recognize themselves. This normalization of hybridity is articulated by Moss (2003), who asserts that "[h]ybridity is no longer an exception to a concept of identity based on some kind of unity, or even unity in diversity. Instead, the myth of 'an' English national, or even post-national, identity has been replaced by an acceptance, or at least acknowledgement of a "multiplicity of identities" (12). *White Teeth* does encourage a hopeful future in which "everyday cultural and racial hybridity" (12) will no longer be as taxing and painful experience. Ali's and Smith's novels advocate for a multilayered British identity that draws on different cultural and national identities at the same time. The identity search undertaken by the characters presented in *Brick Lane* and *White Teeth* and the social spaces they are made to inhabit are characterised by hybridity and negotiation. Hybridity is in this sense defined as something productive, as a means of questioning culture as a stable entity that confers a homogeneous identity (Bhabha 1994: 112). As a result, the characters in the novels are located in a strategic position that allows for redefinition and change. This possibility of change that hybridity offers entails a notion of culture that, in the same way as the concepts of identity and space, are defined as malleable and not static. Homi Bhabha (1999: 37-38) has clearly stated the hybrid aspect of contemporary British society and how this entails a change in the process of cultural articulation that is bringing about cultural transformation, the acceptance of hybridity and the questioning of cultural homogeneity.

In this context it can be argued that the conception of space portrayed in Ali's *Brick Lane* and Smith's *White Teeth* is larger than the geographical territory of Great Britain. The novels, though mainly set in London, either devote a part of the narrative to depict first-generation characters that migrate to Britain from ex-colonial territories Bangladesh in *Brick Lane* or show characters forced to imaginarily cross continents in an attempt to trace their roots back and negotiate their present identity status in Britain in the case of Irie and Millat in *White Teeth*. Therefore, following John McLeod, it could be stated that the vision of British society that these novels address "occupies a space between 'massive floating continents', looking both within and beyond national borders to a transnational consciousness of how the world turns" (2002: 56). The spatial locations where the characters re-negotiate a sense of identity range from the society where they were born, to the community where they migrate as in Nazneen's case or the family in which they live as in the case of Shahana, Bibi, Irie, Marcus, Millat and Magid. James Procter (2006) views *Brick Lane* as an example of this issue and supports what Gilroy terms "aspects of Britain's spontaneous convivial culture", in its "ability to live with alterity without becoming anxious, fearful, or violent" (2004: xi). According to Procter (2006), the refusal to worry about 'race' in these novels, or to invest in any insurrectionary forms of violence as progressive alternative, is not necessarily a retreat from politics" (119). The attitude reflected in the two above discussed novels suggest such a moment in British history in which the initial reactions towards alterity, such as rejection and fear are done away with to give way to what Procter refers to as "the-taken-for-grantedness of multicultural" (119).

To conclude this paper I would argue that the *Brick Lane* and *White Teeth* portray such a multicultural society that is open to change and invests in its residents a desire for self exploration. In Bhabha's terms such literary works show how "culture is less about expressing a pre-given identity and more about the activity of negotiating, regulating and authorising competing, often conflicting demands for collective self-representation" (Bhabha 1999: 37-39). These literary works, by presenting a dynamic representation of spaces in British society stress hybridity and, therefore, celebrate the 'third space'

(1990:211). The novels under analysis subvert the notion of ethnically homogeneous view of contemporary British culture and society. Ali and Smith make use of fiction as a way of representing a hybrid reality that for them is not extraordinary but a part of their ordinary life experience. Both the novel project alternative 'representational spaces' and validate different ways of being British and different strategies of inhabiting a hybrid location in contemporary Britain.

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