

Fathers, Sons, and the Inheritance of Identity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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“This has been the century of the father. A century of men passing on their poisons. And it ends with the twins.”

— Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*

Abstract :

Using a variety of lenses, including race, religion, migration, memory, and family, Zadie Smith's debut novel, *White Teeth* (2000), is a work of literary sophistication and breathtaking intricacy that examines multicultural London and the diasporic postcolonial condition. The relationship between father and son is arguably the most deeply developed narrative thread in the book. These familial ties are also battlegrounds for identity negotiation, intergenerational trauma, and ideological conflict.

Smith expertly depicts the cultural and psychological burdens that their fathers left on immigrant sons, particularly in the Chalfen and Iqbal households. In contrast, the figure of Archie Jones, who is the biological father of Irie, a daughter, represents a less controlling and submissive style of fatherhood. *White Teeth* uses father-son relationships as a primary narrative device to critique Enlightenment rationalism, religious fundamentalism, patriarchy, and the colonial legacies that come with living in a diaspora.

Keywords: colonialism, identity, diaspora, white teeth, and father-son relationships.

I. Samad Iqbal and His Sons: Magid and Millat

a. Samad's Struggle with Identity after Colonialism

Samad Iqbal is a striking example of a man torn between two worlds in *White Teeth*. He is a Bangladeshi immigrant in London who is deeply confused and frustrated with his identity. Samad, a former World War II soldier, feels deceived by the empire he served. A mixture of pride and pain lies at the heart of Samad's identity crisis. He expected honour and respect in return for his loyalty, but instead he ends up working as a waiter, invisible in the society he helped protect. He frequently discusses his ancestry as a descendant of Indian freedom movement leader Mangal Pande. For Samad, maintaining a sense of self-worth in a nation that doesn't value him is more important than merely remembering the past. Finding dignity in a life where he feels constantly diminished is more important than the truth.

"I should have been in charge!" he says. The head man ought to have been me!—a cry that expresses his conviction that he is deserving of more than he has been given. Even though

Samad preaches morality and is deeply religious, his behaviour doesn't always reflect his beliefs. His internal conflict is brought to light by his affair with his son's music teacher, Poppy Burt-Jones. Despite his desire to live a moral life, he succumbs to temptation. His behaviour reflects what Frantz Fanon wrote in *Black Skin, White Masks*: colonised people are often caught between rejecting and copying their colonisers. Samad's greatest concern is that his sons will become disconnected from their heritage as they grow up in Western culture. He sends his son Magid back to Bangladesh in the hopes that the distance will shield him from Western influence, in an attempt to "save" at least one of them. "Magid will grow up away from this," he thinks. poison." However, this choice has more to do with trying to address his own feelings of failure than it does with parenting. He believes that he can repair the harm caused by living in the West by raising one son in the East.

But this decision backfires. Smith demonstrates that geography cannot shield identity. Growing up in Bangladesh, Magid becomes more Westernised than his London-based twin brother Millat. Samad causes a rift in his family rather than upholding tradition. The more he attempts to control his sons' identities, the more estranged he grows. His children live in a messy, multicultural world that contrasts with his insistence on tradition and purity. Smith delicately demonstrates how outmoded notions of identity disintegrate in the face of contemporary reality. She portrays the intense suffering of immigrants who attempt to make sense of their present while clinging to their past through Samad.

b. The "Splitting" of the Sons: Millat and Magid

The separation of Samad Iqbal's twin sons, Magid and Millat, is depicted by Zadie Smith in *White Teeth* as more than a simple physical split; rather, it represents the ideological, cultural, and emotional rifts that immigrant children experience as they grow up in a postcolonial, multicultural society. Their tales illustrate the perplexity of second-generation identity: attempting to strike a balance between inherited customs and the realities of British life. Samad, concerned about the impact of Western values on his offspring, chooses to send Magid back to Bangladesh in the hopes that the distance will help him develop deep cultural and religious ties. While Millat remains in London, he immerses himself in British pop culture, television, street life, and the bustle of adolescent urban life. However, clarity is not achieved by this division. Rather, it produces two sons, each of whom is divided within himself.

Later, Samad calls them "Magid, my westernised Eastern son" in reflection of his failure. And my Western-Easternized son, Millat! He ends up misrepresenting them in an attempt to conceal their identities. Although the twins have quite different upbringings, they both bear the burden of alienation—from their father, from one another, and even from themselves. Magid, who was supposed to be raised religiously and with Bengali values, returns as a fervent supporter of reason and science. He completely disavows religion and aligns himself with white scientist and liberal progress icon Marcus Chalfen. "There is no God, Millat," declares Magid, who now defends science as a form of truth. Only the genetic code." Ironically, the son who grew up in the East returns more Western than anyone else.

In contrast, Millat grows up in London feeling agitated and restless. He is drawn to rebellion because of the racial tension and social discrimination around him. In an attempt to find meaning and combat the racism and hypocrisy he observes in Britain, he joins KEVIN, a radical Islamic group, after years of partying and living on the streets. His anger turns into a sort of identity: "Millat was furious." He was fury incarnate, not even angry. Both sons exhibit extremes: Millat, the wounded and fervent rebel; and Magid, the calm believer in reason and

science. They reside in a cultural liminal space that scholar Homi Bhabha refers to as a "Third Space," where neither of them entirely identifies with British society nor their father's heritage. Smith challenges the dichotomous thinking of East vs. West and modern vs. traditional by using their stories. In actuality, the boys belong to both—and neither—but cultural pressure forces them to pick one side.

The greater postcolonial struggle is also symbolised by their separation. While Millat symbolises the emotional backlash—the rage and suffering brought on by racism, exclusion, and the loss of roots—Magid stands for the way of thinking that was influenced by colonial systems—order, science, and control. From the standpoint of trauma theory, this division is a direct result of Samad's own unresolved trauma. This tension demonstrates how empire leaves behind not only historical wounds but also continuous confusion in identity and belonging. His identity crisis, disappointments, and frustrations affect his sons. The trauma is transmitted rather than healed. Trauma frequently manifests later and in unexpected ways, as trauma expert Cathy Caruth explains. In this instance, it manifests as the icy rationalism of Magid and the radicalism of Millat, both signs of a damaged inheritance.

Zadie Smith also criticises British liberalism and its multiculturalism model. It becomes evident that Magid satisfies the Chalfens' definition of a "good immigrant"—smart, courteous, and eager to blend in—when he returns and is welcomed by the white middle-class family. However, that acceptance is condescending and superficial. On the other hand, Millat's rage highlights the suffering caused by being disregarded, misinterpreted, and compelled to conform to stereotypes. In the end, the twins' separation illustrates how challenging it is to maintain cultural purity in a multicultural, contemporary world. He may not be accepted by society, but at least he refuses to play the part that is expected of him. Their identities aren't clear-cut or complete because they are caught between personal preferences, political pressures, and family expectations. Smith makes no effort to clean up this mess. Rather, she presents it truthfully. Living in the diaspora is characterised by confusion, contradictions, and conflict between the past and present. This is the meaning of being divided.

c. Failure, Fatherhood, and the Burden of Legacy

Samad Iqbal's role as a father in *White Teeth* is closely linked to sentiments of history, displacement, and failure. Especially in the context of British society, he finds it difficult to live up to the traditional image of a man and father. Trying to cling to his cultural and moral values, Samad becomes domineering, especially when it comes to raising his sons. Zadie Smith uses Samad to examine the difficulties faced by immigrant fathers—those who are caught between a romanticised past and the perplexing reality of a diverse, modern world. He feels that the only way to raise Magid with the "right" values is to send him back to Bangladesh. But this isn't a bold or proud choice; rather, it stems from insecurity, fear, and a strong bond with a traumatic past. Samad can't help but reflect on his experiences during World War II and his admiration for the well-known Indian rebel Mangal Pande. He is aware, though, that his own behaviour during the conflict does not reflect that image.

"He hadn't really served as a soldier. He had lacked courage. He hadn't even been Indian."(White Teeth, p. 116)

Samad's feelings of shame and conflict are conveyed in this line. Because of colonial rule and his dashed hopes of resistance, his masculine pride and sense of self are weak and incomplete. In order to raise his kids with discipline and purity in a world that doesn't allow for either,

Samad pushes his own suffering onto them rather than facing it himself. However, the more he tries to exert control, the more his family life spirals out of control. Despite his best efforts to be a strict, moral parent, he has an affair with his son's teacher, Poppy Burt-Jones. Samad's inconsistencies are exposed by this affair; he wants to act morally but is unable to control his own impulses. It demonstrates his loss and the incompatibility of the principles he attempts to live by in his new environment.

According to trauma theory, Samad's problems are not unique to him. His sons' upbringing is impacted by the hurt and uncertainty he bears from his past. Instead of recovering from his trauma, his parenting turns into a means of passing it on. The concept of "postmemory," as defined by Marianne Hirsch, refers to the emotional scars that trauma survivors' children bear from experiences they were not directly involved in. Despite their different upbringings, Samad's unresolved issues and unfulfilled dreams affect both Millat and Magid. A stark contrast is highlighted by Samad's friendship with white Englishman Archie Jones. Archie is easygoing and steers clear of historical or political issues. Archie is passive in contrast to Samad's intensity and drama. However, both fathers fail—Samad by doing too much, and Archie by doing too little. Samad knows how important history is and makes a valiant effort to cling to it, which makes his failure all the more painful.

"Why fight for a history when your kids will discard it all?(White Teeth, page 161)

Samad's frustration is summed up in this line. His children don't share his belief that he is passing on something valuable. Smith uses Samad's character to challenge conventional notions of fatherhood, particularly in immigrant and postcolonial families. To them, he is simply a man full of contradictions—a man who talks about lofty ideals but doesn't live by them. Fatherhood in *White Teeth* is not associated with authority or respect; rather, it frequently results in bewilderment, loneliness, and frantic attempts to remain relevant. Samad's failure is more than just a personal shortcoming. In a world influenced by diverse cultures, contemporary developments, and international movements, it is a part of a broader breakdown of traditional belief systems.

II. Marcus Chalfen and Joshua: Rebellion Through Irony

A more nuanced but impactful illustration of how authority, ideology, and generational conflict manifest in intellectual households can be found in *White Teeth* through the relationship between Marcus Chalfen and his son Joshua. The conflict here isn't as loud or overtly traumatic as that of Samad and his sons, but it nonetheless exposes serious flaws in contemporary notions of reason, science, and control. Marcus has a strong belief in science, and if we examine this father-son conflict through the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's lens, we can see Joshua's actions as a rejection of large, controlling ideas—what Lyotard refers to as "metanarratives." Zadie Smith uses this dynamic to examine how modern liberal thinking, particularly ideas based on science and rationality, can be just as rigid and dominating as older, more traditional forms of power. He believes that biological facts, experiments, and logic are the sources of truth. That attitude is reflected in his FutureMouse project, a genetically modified mouse with a fully mapped life path. "You cannot confound science, Joshua." Marcus views science as definitive and indisputable, as evidenced by the statement, "You cannot argue with a gene" (*White Teeth*, p. 328). Joshua, however, doesn't think so. His father's faith in scientific control feels oppressive to him. Joshua fights back by joining the animal rights organisation FATE,

but he does so subtly and with sarcasm rather than with violence. His behaviour exposes the frailty and limitations of his father's fixation with certainty.

We can see how the Chalfen household reflects a sort of hidden power by looking at Michel Foucault's theories. It's about how life is governed by science and regulations, not about using force. Marcus views his responsibilities as a scientist and a father as being similar: controlling results, influencing the future, and directing behaviour. According to Foucault, "knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting," and Marcus embodies this perfectly. He views his house as a laboratory and his child as a subject. He prioritises analysis over feeling. Joshua, however, pushes back. He doesn't want to be just another experiment or project. His ethical and animal-empathetic rebellion highlights how even love and parenting can be used as tools for controlling and observing someone.

Although Judith Butler is primarily recognised for her research on gender, her theory of performativity is also applicable in this context. Joshua declines to play the role his father wants him to play—that of the intelligent, sensible son who will pursue Marcus's scientific career. Joshua chooses to simply decline that role as a form of resistance. Dramatic rebellion is not what this is. It's quiet but effective—he decides not to be what other people want him to be, and that decision becomes his way of being free. Marcus desires a tidy, predictable, and controlled life. Joshua, however, is drawn to a messier, more uncertain world, what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman refers to as "liquid modernity," where nothing is set in stone and people don't want to be confined. Unlike the FutureMouse, Joshua does not want a life that has been predetermined for him. If we look at Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, Marcus Chalfen is a representation of what Lacan refers to as the "Name-of-the-Father"—the figure of structure, authority, and social rules. He wants the freedom to not know what will happen next. Joshua is refusing to accept that regimented world by rejecting his father's vision. He has no desire to participate in the system that his father established. Rather, he approaches what Lacan refers to as "the Real"—that which is inexplicable and uncontainable. This is reflected in Joshua's fascination with animals and chaos. He finds significance in things that are not easily defined or under control.

a. The Tyranny of Logic and Chalfenism

The Chalfen family in *White Teeth*, and Marcus in particular, stands for a way of thinking that is grounded in reason, science, and liberal principles that are representative of Western modernity. Marcus is a middle-class white scientist who firmly believes that everything, including human identity, can be explained, enhanced, and controlled by logic and biology. His devotion to the FutureMouse™ project is a reflection of his belief in accuracy and advancement.

"Logic, beauty, and the right DNA sequences were everything to Marcus" (*White Teeth*, p. 349)

This line demonstrates Marcus's belief in perfection and order, which reduces life to tidy formulas and sequences. According to his perspective, the erratic aspects of being human—such as emotions, disobedience, and chaos—become issues that need to be resolved. Marcus's worldview is influenced by Enlightenment philosophers like Kant and Descartes, who thought that human reason could explain the world and advance society through science. In his home, logic governs everything, leaving little room for emotional depth or difference. By emphasising DNA and biology so much, Marcus reflects a way of thinking known as biological

determinism—the notion that our identities can be explained solely by our genes. This belief supports a scientific worldview in which only that which can be measured or proven is regarded as real or valuable. This way of thinking is too limited and ignores how society, culture, and history shape individuals, according to critics like Stephen Jay Gould.

The concept of biopolitics developed by Michel Foucault aids in our comprehension of Marcus's domestic influence. According to Foucault, power in contemporary society frequently operates covertly through neutral-seeming systems and science. In the Chalfen household, Marcus applies scientific reasoning to guide both his work and his parenting. The FutureMouse™ is a perfect example of how life can be tracked, studied, and managed. He anticipates that his son Joshua will follow a predetermined course that is based on reason and consistency. Although no physical force is used, there is a lot of pressure to fit into this system. As a result, science and control are closely linked to family life in their home.

Marcus's faith in science as the ultimate truth is seen from a postmodern standpoint as merely another version of a grand, controlling story, or what Jean-François Lyotard referred to as a "meta-narrative." Stories like these are frequently questioned in today's world, particularly when they disregard difference and uncertainty. Joshua feels suffocated in the midst of this overly rational world. His uneasiness demonstrates how younger generations might reject these unchangeable realities in favour of more adaptable, fragmented ways of being. Judith Butler's idea of performativity can help us comprehend Joshua's subdued resistance. Joshua is a symbol of someone who doesn't want to be neatly explained or controlled. His father anticipates that he will lead a rational, scientific life. Joshua, however, decides not to comply. Instead of forging a radical new identity, he merely deviates from the path that has been outlined for him. This choice exposes the flaws in Marcus's perspective. It demonstrates that no matter how comprehensive a system of logic appears to be, it is unable to adequately represent the ambiguity and unpredictable nature of true human identity. Joshua's rejection creates space for alternative lifestyles devoid of predetermined patterns or standards.

b. Irony as a Form of Resistance in Joshua's Rebellion

Marcus Chalfen's son Joshua presents a stark contrast to his father's rigid, analytical worldview. Joshua quietly pushes back through irony, doubt, and distance rather than directly opposing Marcus, who is firmly committed to reason, logic, and the idea that science can make everything better. Their conflict is not merely a generational argument; rather, it represents a more profound conflict between two worldviews, one influenced by postmodern scepticism and the other by modernist certainty. Joshua's use of irony is consistent with what scholars like Linda Hutcheon define as a postmodern strategy for subverting prevailing notions. Joshua uses irony to maintain a critical distance from Marcus instead of arguing with him directly or dismissing him outright. This enables him to challenge his father's principles without completely severing his relationship with him. Irony serves as Joshua's shield in a sense. It allows him to recognise Marcus's fallacies in his reasoning—what could be referred to as the "tyranny of logic"—without being overtaken by it. To live under his father's roof, he does not need to share his beliefs. Rather, in a world where everything is meant to be explicable by science, he subtly asserts his own identity through humour and detachment.

Joshua's position can be interpreted as a classic father-son conflict from a Freudian standpoint. According to Freud, sons frequently rebel against their fathers in an effort to establish their individuality. Joshua is attempting to distance himself from Marcus's authority and inflexible values, as evidenced by his sardonic and cool demeanour. However, this is more than just a

personal issue; it also reflects a larger cultural change. Joshua's subdued rebellion serves as a metaphor for how younger generations frequently reject inherited beliefs when they no longer seem valid or relevant. His actions cast doubt on his father's authority as well as the larger impact of scientific thinking, which does not allow for emotional or cultural complexity.

Joshua's stance can be better understood in light of Homi Bhabha's "third space" theory. According to Bhabha, living between various cultures and ideologies shapes one's identity, which isn't fixed. Joshua lives in this liminal space between his father's faith in science and his own ambivalence. His ironic rebellion doesn't explicitly reject or accept anything; rather, it forges a new, adaptable way of being. Joshua is not constrained by his father's beliefs or compelled to take a different position in this "third space." Rather, he subtly forges a unique identity that defies easy classification. Joshua's reaction to his father exposes a central weakness in Enlightenment thought: the notion that reason and science can account for every aspect of human existence. This view ignores too much, particularly the intangible emotional, cultural, and personal aspects of human nature. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer contended in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, placing too much trust in reason can actually result in new forms of control and alienation. Marcus's worldview is lacking something, as evidenced by Joshua's ironic distance. It implies the need for a more expansive, flexible perspective on life—one that takes into account individuality, diversity, and uncertainty.

c. The Father-Son Relationship and Its Wider Consequences

Beyond their personal disagreements, Marcus and Joshua's conflict represents a broader conflict between two worldviews: the more ambiguous, inquisitive attitude of the postmodern world and the disciplined, self-assured ideals of the Enlightenment. This conflict between father and son also reflects what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as a struggle over "cultural capital and symbolic power." Marcus is a representative of a specific class and culture—white, middle-class, and scientifically educated—and it is a deeper struggle between tradition and change, control and resistance. His power comes from belonging to a system that values reason, knowledge, and order; it is not just personal. His worldview, which prioritises logic and science, is an attempt to mould his family and even society. Joshua, however, does not silently embrace this viewpoint. He rebels in order to challenge Marcus's authority. He aspires to create a new identity that deviates from his father's limited definition of rationality and success. Stuart Hall's theory that cultural identity is a space where meanings are continuously contested and reinterpreted is consistent with this type of resistance. Joshua is redefining identity for himself, not merely rejecting his father's principles.

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, Marcus represents what Jacques Lacan refers to as the "Symbolic Order"—the framework of authority, language, and regulations that moulds our perception of the outside world. That means control, structure, and science in this instance. Joshua deviates from the norm with his distance and irony. Joshua's actions go beyond simple teenage disobedience because he instead highlights the flaws in this system—what Lacan calls the "Real," the aspect of the human experience that defies tidy explanations and rational frameworks. It upends the very framework that his father holds dear. By doing this, he compels us to face the ambiguity and inconsistencies that reason and logic attempt to avoid. He highlights the complexity and fragmentation of identity. From a postcolonial perspective, the relationship between Marcus and Joshua also reflects colonial conflicts over power and knowledge. Joshua's ironic rebellion can be viewed as a component of the postcolonial subject's endeavour to contest these prevailing narratives. Marcus's faith in scientific reason reflects a colonial mindset where Western knowledge was treated as "universal," while other ways of

knowing were frequently disregarded or erased. He embodies the type of hybrid identity that Homi Bhabha discusses—someone who doesn't entirely fit into any one truth or category. His opposition is quiet but effective because it demonstrates that there are multiple realities and that science is not the only source of knowledge about human nature and existence.

Marcus and Joshua's tumultuous relationship also demonstrates how significant ideological differences impact actual families and people's emotional health. Marcus rejects emotion, creativity, and cultural diversity due to his rigid belief in reason and order. A more general criticism of contemporary life found in critical theory is that the fixation with control, reason, and order frequently comes at the expense of human warmth and diversity. This causes distance and disconnection within the family. Joshua's disobedience is a subdued but unmistakable indication that we should reconsider these priorities. It's an exhortation to embrace complexity and blend empathy and reason instead of constantly attempting to control and simplify.

conclusion

Zadie Smith explores deeper themes like identity, cultural tension, and generational conflict in a diverse, postcolonial Britain in *White Teeth* by focussing on the complex relationships between fathers and sons, particularly those between Marcus Chalfen and his son Joshua, Magid and Millat, and Samad and his sons. Samad's attempts to teach his kids traditional values despite his own immigrant background highlight the challenges of striking a balance between cultural traditions and the demands of adjusting to a new society. However, as demonstrated by Marcus's conflict with Joshua, who opposes through irony and emotional detachment, the Chalfen family illustrates how the rigid ideas of scientific thought can cause strife within families.

The novel can be interpreted as a reflection of how young people negotiate the values they inherit, drawing on theories from scholars such as Stuart Hall, who sees "cultural identity as a site of ongoing negotiation," and Pierre Bourdieu, whose concept of "cultural capital" aids in explaining power dynamics. Marcus and Joshua's conflict is given depth by Jacques Lacan's theory of the "Symbolic Order," which demonstrates how rebellion can upend inflexible social structures. Homi Bhabha's concept of "postcolonial hybridity," on the other hand, aids in framing these characters as existing between cultures and defying easy classification. It is evident from these relationships that fixed ideologies, whether founded on scientific certainty or cultural pride, frequently fall short of capturing the complete experience of actual people. The book promotes a more flexible view of identity that allows for emotional nuance, a range of backgrounds, and changing viewpoints. Ultimately, *White Teeth* goes beyond family issues to address broader societal pressures to fit in. Father-son disputes highlight how difficult—yet essential—it is to challenge ingrained beliefs, resist authority, and rethink our identities in a world where change and diversity are the norm.

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