

Absent Fathers and Trauma in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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Abstract

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) has been extensively mined for its resonances with postcolonial issues of ethnic hybridity and multiculturalism, and particularly for the migrant trauma and cultural and economic marginalization asserted for its main Jamaican/Bengali families which cause so much anxiety over their hyphenated identities. While such readings are valuable, they tend to read the novel's characters as isolated agents dealing with abstract cultural forces and not as relational family or social members. Specifically, why is every major father in the story a bad one? This work seeks to fill a small but vital gap by drawing on research on emotionally absent fathers to interrogate how the characters of *White Teeth* are both hurt by and propagate non-fathering, and how this may further the interpretation of the novel.

Keywords: Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, postcolonialism, postmodernism, fatherhood studies, war in fiction, English literature

I. Introduction

In 2000, Zadie Smith made her arrival as the wunderkind of British letters with her debut novel, *White Teeth*. Lauded as “young, black, British – and the first publishing sensation of the millennium” in an article in *The Guardian* (“She’s Young”), Smith was subsequently rewarded with literary accolades along with voluminous journalistic and scholarly attention. Early reviews focused on *White Teeth*’s comedy (Gill 18), with much subsequent criticism discussing its ethnic hybridity, remarking on its “‘celebratory’ attitude towards multicultural relations” (Fernández 145).

Yet the interests of academics have not always reflected Smith's. In an early television interview with Charlie Rose she begins by stating "the main story is about Archie and Samad" (qtd. in Rose). But few studies have closely read Archie and Samad as characters, and fewer have analyzed them as fathers. Both men fail in this role, as does nearly every father in the story. The business of this study is to interrogate why, and to suggest what this might mean to the novel and its readings.

White Teeth concerns the intertwining of three London families, the Joneses (English/Jamaican), Iqbals (Bangladeshi), and Chalfens (English/Jewish-Polish). While some analyses have parsed the text as a "blueprint of London . . . from the perspective of former colonial subjects" (Addante 72), postcolonial and diaspora studies have inclined toward examining issues of trauma that "migrants face when they encounter a hostile environment in their host societies" (Zapata 9) and the distress of those who negotiate dual homelands. Samad admits, "we are split people" (*White Teeth* [WT] 150), and much discourse assesses "the play between roots and routes" (Addante 76). Smith's narrator acerbically calls Britain "Happy Multicultural Land" (WT 384), and, as Younghee Kwon adds, hybridity is usually for WT's characters "hardly a matter of choice in the novel" (1217).

Yet the novel tends to favor this hybridity, valorizing vibrant heterogeneity over torpid homogeneity via such moves as its characters' interracial sexual attractions and the extended dental/biological metaphors. Releasing deadening or superseded cultural values is likened to the extraction of infected teeth – or in the case of the Chalfens, Joyce thinks in "botanic language" (Fernández 149) and Marcus sees genetics as explanations for human diversity. But hybridity also disorients *White Teeth*'s displaced characters as to what they are. Samad endlessly attempts "to reconcile his Bengali identity with his English identity" (Beukema 3) and lionizes his forebear Mangal Pande "to cope with his marginalisation, his sense of powerlessness . . . [as] a college educated waiter, a hen-pecked patriarch, and a Muslim with a 'mutinous body' that desires western women" (Amine 80). Alison Hitch, whose dissertation does address fatherhood in the novel, argues that Samad stubbornly over-binarizes his west/east differences, and is unhappiest when reminded of

his unstable “in-between-ness” (114). The children in turn do not directly suffer from World War II, but they also struggle to belong, without the anchoring roots of a native heritage. Where the adults try to resolve split identities, the children endeavor to find one (Gøttcke 272).

Much of the story transpires vis-à-vis the base social unit of families. Yet each one is dysfunctional, and if *White Teeth* is a narrative of trauma, families propagate its transmission: Smith notes of her mother that she “saw that process of passing on and how desperate and depressing that is when families pass on their traumas from one generation to the next” (qtd. in O’Grady 106). Archie, Samad, and Marcus regularly escape their families to male enclaves (O’Connell’s, Marcus’s study), and the first two men have distant marriages to Clara and Alsana, who are “kept in the dark” (*WT* 55). Devon Campbell-Hall (178) notes that the only healthy couple in the novel is Neena and Maxine, despite the former being permanently disparaged as “Niece-of-Shame” (*WT* 53), and Neena must hector the fractious Jones-Iqbal members into attending Magid’s lecture (*WT* 423) together as a family. Clara herself grows up with a mother strictly devoted to her Jehovah Witness’s faith and a father solely devoted to his television. Even extended clans are unsupportive, where Archie’s relations slight his wedding to Clara, the relatives at Samad’s restaurant squabble over money, and Alsana’s catty and gossipy kin engage in schadenfreude, pretending to sympathize while being “quietly pleased” (*WT* 177) about her loss of Magid.

Despite the familial affiliations, the stamp of the novel is loneliness, for it is populated by people who speak past each other. A recurring grievance is the inability to get through to others (*WT* 334, 335). Alsana laments that Samad is “in his own world; he just won’t listen” (*WT* 285), but Neena accuses her of the same, chiding her to “for once just shut that chasm of a mouth” (*WT* 287). Philip Tew notes that the text’s characters are humorous to the reader but not with each other (48). Even the narrator can be pedantic and interruptive, although possibly “the narrator is mimicking the dogmatic certainty of her characters” (Bergholtz 542). Lydia Roupakia comments that the characters “seldom manage to fight their superficiality and shallowness before approaching others” (168), with Patricia Goldblatt claiming that Irie stands out from the other

“bigoted, self-absorbed, or uncaring characters” (53). Some readings also defend Clara, saying her “quieter attempts at diplomacy typically go unheard” (Squires 59). But Irie and Clara also snub each other over Irie’s wish to travel to Africa (*WT* 312). Where this silence and disconnection is recognized by critics, it is again inevitably attributed to natural generational conflict. While this is a likely component, it seems to miss something.

Drawing attention to this absence is not intended to fault Smith, who is not responsible for “the fetishistic attitudes that introduced [her] to readers as the poster girl for the rebranding of the global Anglophone novel” (Johnston 91), and which has led to critical grumbling about overexposure – or at least retrospective comments about *White Teeth* being a naïve and too-nicely-packaged “enjoyable commodity” (Kwon 1216) about cosmopolitan diversity. Smith has of late been her own harshest critic, expressing dissatisfaction with the book as a novice work (Chu). Nor is scholarship on the book’s currency with issues of multicultural Britain or postcolonialism superfluous to this present effort – it endeavors to complement such work. But following Smith’s cue in her Rose interview, if the narrative centers around and sympathizes with Archie and Samad, why are they such non-functioning fathers? At best, they have been analyzed as “figures of confused masculinities” (Beukema 3) who cling to fading empire values of patriarchy. Ashley Dawson similarly reads Samad as feeling his conflicted identity has enervated his masculinity (158), thus his cathexis with his doughty ancestor Pande.

The dominant strand is hence reading the characters as symbols of postcolonial/diasporic/generational tensions, or via a gender lens. Yet this field of interpretation has tended to make them less substantial as people, perhaps playing into James Wood’s critique of *White Teeth* as an implausible work of “hysterical realism.” Further, situating the novel’s cast as atomized placeholders shaken by cultural forces or “original trauma” (*WT* 136) misses how the men relate to their children as fathers, and how their parenting (in)actions exacerbate these issues. A closer reading of *White Teeth* might trace an additional pattern, that of Samad, Archie, Marcus, and Darcus’ “ossified fatherhood” (Tew 47), and how their distance from their children aggravates and transmits their problems.

In brief: part of the reason Irie, Magid, Millat, Joshua, and Clara – and possibly Archie, Samad, and Marcus in their youths – suffer or languish is absent fathers, and exploring how and why may enliven a new route of interpretation to the novel.

Scholarship on fathers in fiction is sparse, with a few recent works adding to a small field; as Eva Bueno, Terry Caesar, and William Hummel assert, “modern and contemporary literature has been understood too little by either refusing or presuming to understand fatherhood” (8; see also Davis). Work on real-life non-performative fathers is ampler and may be salient here as a template. In 1991, Margo Maine defined “father hunger” as “a deep, persistent desire for emotional connection with the father that is experienced by all children” (21). Other work analyzes damage from death or divorce or that experienced, signally, from emotionally unavailable fathers even within intact homes (Perrin et al. 316), where the father is “physically present yet absent due to disinterest or neglect” (East et al. 285); James Herzog agrees in seeing “father hunger” when “the father is *felt* to be absent” (52, emphasis mine). Elizabetta Franzoso diagnoses in the children of these fathers such difficulties as “inability to commit, fear of abandonment, lack of communication, poor emotional intelligence and/or understanding of themselves,” and Dennis Balcom argues that sons symptomatically react “in one of two variations” (286) to emotionally absent fathers: by suppressing trauma and feelings, possibly via rigid over-identification with the father – as with Kazuo Ishiguro’s butler Stevens in *Remains of the Day*, who strives to emulate his chilly forebear (see Eckert) – or with antisocial reactivity – “I’ll never be like him!” (Balcom 286) – driven by grief or resentment.

The deployment of fathers in literature may respond to plot needs for conflict, ensuring that there will be more like Hamlet’s than like Atticus Finch or Silas Marner. Josep Armengol-Carrera (215) agrees that American literature tends toward fatherless protagonists, but posits that the early popularity of rags-to-riches narratives *a la* Jay Gatsby favors independent actors. Nevertheless, fictional fathers often respond to contemporary problems; medieval fathers were often carried away by illness, whereas the distant-but-stern stereotype of nineteenth-century paters reflects economic shifts wrought by the Industrial Revolution,

where fathers working in factories or offices and not on farms had less time at home to interact with children (McKnight 1). In James Joyce's *Dubliners*, fathers are immobilized by alcoholism, echoing the multifaceted paralysis of Irish society. Mid-twentieth century narrative often features orphans, as a result of fathers who died in wartime (or, more recently, were killed by Voldemort). Yet where economic or wartime exigencies do not impinge, nevertheless literary fathers tend to be benignly ineffectual or actively harsh, classically iterated in Elizabeth Bennett's library-hiding father and Eliza Doolittle's bibulous, uncaring père.

Smith may thus have been informed by numerous older literary examples, including those by E. M. Forster, whom she has admired as an influence (see Tolan). Applying these findings to *White Teeth*, if it can be granted that Clara, Alsana, and Joyce are basically competent as mothers – and Taryn Beukema agrees that the text's women are overall “strong, intelligent, and relatively unconflicted” (3), they might be removed as a distractor. Might a comparison of each father's relationship to his children then tease out patterns?

II. Archie and Irie

With Archie Jones, there is little complication regarding migrant or postcolonial origins, for he is “good honest English stock” (*WT* 84), with a generic Welsh-English surname. While others wander in a confusing battle for self or belonging, Archie “shows little to no concern for settling on any particular identity” (Jang 617). Archie's only social marginalization is class, that if anything, his name is *too* mundanely English, being like a ‘Smith’ (allowing the author a tidy self-referential joke): “we're nobody. . . . My father used to say: ‘We're the chaff, boy, we're the chaff’” (*WT* 84). Class, or more precisely poverty and the limited horizons of Brighton, dogs Archie through his youth, as he cannot attend grammar school when his mother “couldn't afford to buy the uniform” (*WT* 77), and possibly stunts his prospects in wartime when he is fobbed off onto the “Buggered Battalion” (*WT* 77).

Presumably much of Archie's lack of self-confidence, shown in his habit of flipping coins to avoid decisions, precipitates from the shock he experiences as a seventeen-year-old soldier (*WT* 71) in wartime. Smith has said that much of the story involves issues of "how you get over a horrible atrocity like the war" (qtd. in Rose), and after witnessing his superior officer and comrades tortured and murdered, and being browbeaten by Samad into (not) executing a war criminal (Dr. Sick), the narrator emphasizes that Archie "looked his tender age . . . his moon-shaped face lit up like a big baby" (*WT* 102). Yet Archie's timidity evidently predates the war and is plausibly linked to his abandonment at five years old by his father, who "went out for a proverbial pack of fags and never returned" (*WT* 92). Little is mentioned by Archie of his missing father except hazy anecdotes, such as the demeaning 'chaff' comment, a memory flash of "a dull childhood" (*WT* 12), and the suggestion that Archie's father might also have lacked a stable home by his "haphazard appearance on the planet in the back room of a Bromley public house circa 1895 or 1896 or quite possibly 1897" (*WT* 280).

At the beginning of the novel, juxtaposed against the father-son duo of Mo and Arshad (*WT* 5), Archie is alone after a failed and childless marriage. At times, he still resembles a lost child. He is the only soldier who obeys Captain Dickinson-Smith without defiance, seemingly welcoming being told what to do, and, while his enduring friendship with Samad grounds the novel, Samad also takes on the aspect of a replacement father, for Archie defers to him and is "in awe of his friend" (*WT* 92) in wartime, and both Samad and Horst Ibelgaufts address Archie as "boy" (*WT* 93, 14). In civilian life his boss, "Mr. Hero," again has a paternalistic relationship with Archie, seeing his "big eyes, like a child's or a baby seal's" (*WT* 60), while Archie is childish and naïvely oblivious to the workplace social cues of discrimination against his wife (Hitch 99). Archie "always wanted advice" (*WT* 21), and should none be forthcoming, he seeks out parental direction from fate via another coin. He refers to himself as "Archie-boy" (*WT* 9, 15), and even dutifully calls the marriage registrar "father" (*WT* 42).

Archie's possible father-absence causes several problems for him reminiscent of the research on father-hunger noted above: such men have

“difficulty developing and sustaining self-esteem, forming lasting emotional attachments, recognizing their feelings, or being expressive with their adult partners and children” (Balcom 283). Accordingly, Archie has anxiety in committing, and perhaps internalizes his childhood hurt via a poor self-image. Archie “couldn’t imagine any piece of him slugging it out in the gene pool with a piece of Clara and winning” (*WT* 57), and, at times, he allows Samad’s frustrations to lead into bullying him; when Archie as usual reflexively reaches for a coin, Samad bellows, “for once in your pathetic little life, make a decision” (*WT* 377). Hortense’s praise of Archie as a “peacemaker” (*WT* 318) belies a passivity and proclivity to emotionally withdraw, for he has difficulty trusting women (*WT* 7), and, within a short time of his remarriage, Clara is already asking, “why are you never here?” (*WT* 41) when Archie is exiting for another meeting with Samad. Scenes of tension between them usually end with Archie resorting to the only paternal template he knows, of leaving, as he once more slips away to O’Connell’s.

Archie’s childhood injuries are reflected in his superficial relationship with Irie. He is at O’Connell’s celebrating after she is born (*WT* 204) instead of with his family, and in a raging storm is so preoccupied with DIY fixes that he fails to notice the children have gone outside (*WT* 190). As Irie matures, some of the novel’s saddest scenes are her pangs of inadequacy when she compares her body to the “English Rose” (*WT* 222) she can never be. While Irie’s insecurities have postcolonial or racial significations, it is Clara who notices her disquiet and reassures her, “Irie, my love, you’re fine” (*WT* 222), and never her father. As Irie acts out and disrespects Archie, saying “Jesus *Christ*, Dad. What are you *on*?” (*WT* 198) while they watch the Berlin Wall fall, Archie again demurs and literally tries to change the channel – as he later does in declining to be involved in allowing Irie to go to Africa, saying “it’s not up to me, is it love, is it? It’s your mother, really” (*WT* 313). When Irie enters the Chalfen home, she finds comfort in entering what seems to be a supportive family matrix, where “there existed fathers who dealt in the present” (*WT* 271). But while Clara has misgivings about Irie’s time spent there, Archie only spouts banalities as he exits: “they sound nice, love. . . . Well, good for you. Must dash” (*WT* 285). Is it possible that Irie’s

constant talking about the Chalfens betrays a futile hope for her father to show interest in her by objecting to them?

III. Samad, Magid, and Millat

Samad Iqbal is more difficult to parse as specifically affected by absent fathering, as he is physically maimed by the war and psychically hurt by being marginalized and racially ostracized in England, along with suffering a hostile and sexless marriage (*WT* 115). Unlike Archie's lowly upbringing, Samad feels the loss of both his native Bangladeshi land and former prestige as a university student, in comparison to his present servile work as a restaurant waiter. While serving cynical pastiche dishes from his continent to impatient customers, he suffers "abuse from Shiva and others; condescension from Ardashir; never seeing Alsana" (*WT* 48), and feels a need to "reassert something, anything" (*WT* 49) when he is no longer sure what he is. As with Irie's body-image pains, one of the novel's touching moments is when Samad tearfully breaks down in front of Irie that England "is a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. . . . But you have made a devil's pact . . . it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere" (*WT* 336).

Nonetheless there is a curious lacuna. While Samad builds an affinity with traditional Bengalese-Muslim values and his storied great-grandfather, he never mentions his father in his pedigree. There are only snippets of praise for his mother, who did not "spend the household money" on luxuries like Alsana allegedly does (*WT* 52), and because Samad's light-skinned face was "so precious his mother kept him in from the sun's rays, sent him to the best tutors, and covered him in linseed oil twice a day" (*WT* 94). Although Samad's father may still be alive, as a grandfather is passingly mentioned in Magid's letter home (*WT* 179), Samad evidently had little meaningful connection with him. The only father that seems resonant to Samad is an intangible one, the perhaps also-uncaring British empire that 'adopted' him in a new nation, and which he both resents and craves approval from as a soldier (Kershaw 875). While we have less to go on, we see glimpses of this blank paternal space in

Samad's childhood in his conduct toward Magid and Millat, which is characterized by the same lack of personal connection.

Here again, criticism assumes intergenerational divisions, complicated by the children's hyphenated identity as Bengalese but English-born, to explain why Millat prefers Bruce Springsteen to traditional music (*WT* 130). The pat conclusion is that generational change is inevitable; Alsana chides Samad that Millat "is second generation – he was born here – naturally he will do things differently" (*WT* 240). The narrator sometimes compounds this axiom by bewailing (though perhaps biased through Samad's viewpoint) the rebelliousness of "all the children" (*WT* 182) in the Iqbal/Begum clan, as though any parental attempts to intervene are naïve, if not wrong-headed. Samad does love his boys, as seen in the achingly poignant scene where he sends Magid off at the airport – his conscience berates him that he is "a bad husband, an indifferent father" (*WT* 118), and that his one-off interest in taking his boys to school is only an excuse to woo Poppy. Yet Samad has little interest in building a relationship with them. He disengages and refuses to get immersed when issues with his sons reach a crisis, and Joyce knocks on their door to speak to Alsana, who snarls that the men "leave the women to clear up the shit" (*WT* 362).

What concern Samad does have for his boys tends toward objectifying them as means of validating and perpetuating a religio-cultural tradition. As Roupakia remarks, "His sons' wellbeing does not register in terms other than his own obsession with cultural purity" (158). Samad's faith at times is merely a tool to assert himself above what he sees as western decadence, but also to mold his sons (Tew 64). He comically misunderstands Magid's letter (*WT* 179), seeing only what he wishes to. Millat is a "good-for-nothing" (*WT* 113) and Magid a "thorn in my foot" (*WT* 374) for not succeeding by *his* standards, and if Samad says that he is "hell-bound" but must "concentrate on saving my sons" (*WT* 158), the sons are not consulted – they have "strayed so far from the life I had intended for them" (*WT* 336). Alsana can be vindictive, but she shouts about her children that "their father ignores them and bullies them" (*WT* 165), and recognizes that Samad prioritizes control over Millat's growth when she says, "let go, Samad Miah. Let the boy go" (*WT* 240).

If Samad otherwise avoids his boys via O'Connell's visits, they reciprocate by building their own worlds without their faraway father. When we first meet Millat, his world is electronic, as he blocks out Samad with a visor video game (*WT* 122); Magid's is an English fantasy where he belongs to "some other family" (*WT* 126) with cellos and biking trips to France, and with a doctor father. In one of the more darkly comic episodes, Samad and Alsana fight in the backyard, and the two boys detachedly watch it as a sports event or "firework display" (*WT* 167) rather than being afraid.

As the boys mature, they effectively enact Balcom's dichotomy of father-hunger precipitating either internalized hurt (Magid) or externalized anger (Millat). After Magid's long absence from his father in Bangladesh, Magid returns an aloof and guarded individual – Irie mistakes his dispassion for serenity, but his mother laments that "one hardly likes to touch him" (*WT* 350). Magid does find a pseudo-father-figure in Marcus, but he may also seek to live up to his father. Many of his accomplishments index Samad's frustrated ambitions: he takes a scholarly interest in biology, the same major Samad had; both evidently take pride in their education, for Samad "glow[s] with pleasure" (*WT* 114) when mistaken by Poppy for a professor. Dawson also posits that Samad's sending of Magid itself comprises a sort of biology experiment "to assess the impact of genetic inheritance" (163). Samad does not seem to recall that as a soldier he wished to out-English the English, which is what Magid *does* with his "Mr. White-trousered Englishman with his stiff-upper-lip" manners (*WT* 375).

As with Samad, with Millat we deal with partials, for he does deal with prejudice and a discouraging yearning for belonging – as a preteen he knows he "was a Paki no matter where he came from . . . he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in this country . . . and Millat recognised the anger, thought it recognised him, and grabbed it with both hands" (*WT* 194). He understands little about the Salman Rushdie protest, seeing it as only as "another instance of 'us' versus 'them'" (Amine 77). Yet the narrator begins "The Trouble with Millat" segment by calling him "the second son . . . the loser of two vital minutes that he would never make up . . . *not in his father's eyes*" (*WT* 181). Samad and his non-

conversations with Millat are typified by non-listening just as with Magid, where Samad does not read Millat's body language to bother noticing that 'chief' is an insult in his street slang (*WT* 180); other botched interchanges consist of Samad lecturing about Pande or war stories, and Millat being slapped on the ear (*WT* 187) or ordered to leave after disrespecting Samad's speeches.

Hence, if Millat's rebelliousness is driven by his lack of identity and belonging, it is also arguably catalyzed by a cold and disapproving father, for he accordingly reacts to father-absence with Balcom's second response, reactivity and antisocial fury, often targeted at provoking Samad: Millat's ultimate insult against Pande is that he is boring and thus irrelevant (Isaacs 40), as opposed to his cousin Rajnu, who finds an obscure study on Pande out of love for his uncle (*WT* 214). Part of Millat's newfound piety in KEVIN may be to outdo or assert himself against his scorning father, for he scowls to Joyce, "I'm more of a f – ing Muslim than he is" (*WT* 277). Millat's pursuits effectively seek to compensate for Samad's absence: he becomes obsessed with god-*father* movies, where "Millat really learned about fathers" (*WT* 181). For all Joyce Chalfen's hubris, she correctly guesses that Millat has "a lack of a father figure" (*WT* 270). KEVIN partly answers this need, for the "Mafia-Islam" (Childs 9) hodgepodge has aspects of a pseudo-family: its members call each other brother and sister.

IV. Marcus and Joshua and Others

Marcus Chalfen's poised arrogance and comfortable position as an Oxbridge geneticist does not suggest trauma or an identity crisis. Nevertheless, we are told that the *Chalfenovskies* are also immigrants via Germany and Poland (*WT* 273), and that Marcus endures some racism from relatives "who even now could not disguise their distaste for Joyce's Israelite love-match" (*WT* 261). The narrator periodically gives us cryptic hints of the unspeakable, such as the "work camps" in wartime Poland (*WT* 89) and possible horrors seen by park denizen Sol Jozefowicz (*WT* 67). But Marcus mentions little about his childhood, musing only how he said the word *miracle* at three, and his atheist father "clipped his ear for

it" (*WT* 352). It may be that Dr. Perret also served as a father-figure to replace a distant or war-damaged patriarch, for, upon meeting Magid, he warmly recalls meeting Perret as a youth and establishing a nurturing mentor-protégé relationship (*WT* 348), a moment of sentimentality Marcus would normally deride. If Joshua's actions involve outraging his father in order to seek attention, it is also suggestive that Marcus, coming from a family of (lapsed) Jews in the early postwar years, should seek a collaborationist doctor as mentor, for "his work on FutureMouse© is the direct result of the racial scientific research of the Nazis" (Gill 21).

We know less about Marcus's past. But his present obsessions again make him an ineffectual father. When Irie first meets the Chalfens, she envies how "conversation flowed" and how no one "hid their feelings in a toolbox" (*WT* 273). She is impressed by a father who plays jazz piano with his son (*WT* 271) and a family where all the boys "adored their mother and admired their father" (*WT* 261). Yet this amity is illusory, for the Chalfens' self-assuredness is so complete and stagnant that no one really hears anyone else, as everyone is already always right – the perfection of "Chalfenism" renders further discussion unnecessary, so that at mealtimes "the boredom was palpable" (*WT* 262). Marcus spends most of his time apart from his family in his study-sanctuary, and his world is so superciliously insular that he never questions the ethics of his eugenics work from another's position (Johnston 91), including Joshua's. Nor does Joyce, in wanting to 'prune' Millat and Irie like her plants (Addante 77), examine her own motives, which involve both a patronizing sort of White Woman's Burden and "boredom and sexual desire" (Wille 461).

This self-satisfied deafness to anyone else's needs or views is propelled to comical extremity. There is the running joke that no one listens to Oscar's opinions, which are dismissively gainsaid: Oscar says of Millat, "don't know. Don't care" and Joyce replies that "Oscar gets terribly upset when Millat doesn't come" (*WT* 274). Another gag is Marcus recurrently foraging in the refrigerator and vaguely half-listening to others, answering with "Mmm" (*WT* 266, 269) or telling Joshua with his mouth full of cheese, "I'm afwaid Miyat's oar mu'rer's jurishdicshun" (*WT* 276). Tellingly, Irie switches off Joyce's gardening radio show, for it

is yet another gratuitous ‘expert’ monologue: she feels “it was quite therapeutic, switching Joyce off” (*WT* 332).

Marcus’s evasion of his role as father is epitomized in Joshua, where the hurt is less played for laughs. Again, in a novel with skepticism for any form of purity, there are multiple vectors informing Joshua’s anxieties and loneliness; at his red-in-tooth-and-claw school, he is “Chalfen the Chubster” and “Josh-with-the-Jewfro” (*WT* 247) and builds a board game world to belong somewhere. The novel is sympathetic to the idea that teenage angst is simply natural, for “four months in the life of a seventeen-year-old is the stuff of swings and roundabouts” (*WT* 334). Yet even as an infant, Joshua seems to only briefly see his father on his mother’s shoulder as Marcus is concentrated “on his peculiar helixes” (*WT* 259), and Joshua’s fuzzy remembrance as he smokes marijuana is being alone in his room “constructing Lego Medieval Castle” (*WT* 411) and fantasizing about the neighboring babysitter he is too shy to approach.

Millat and Irie’s arrival may merely exacerbate prior tensions when Joshua sees that his uncaring father is joined by his mother, as Millat monopolizes both Joyce and Irie’s attentions. Irene Fernández notes that “each of the adult Chalfens establishes a connection with one of the two teenagers that confirms the lack of communication with their own son” (149). As usual, no one listens – when Joshua objects, “I can’t talk in my own house?” (*WT* 275), both his parents brush him off, and he leaves in anger, eventually running away; it is Irie who must remind Joyce that Joshua’s trip to Glastonbury was two months earlier (*WT* 359). Marcus views Joshua’s estrangement impassively as an unfortunate but meaningless gesture, for unlike the certainty of science, “there was no rhyme nor reason for so much of what people did” (*WT* 348). Joshua then joins, as with Millat, a criminal ersatz-family, albeit one with the sexual enticement of Joely. Following Balcom, Joshua’s actions are a lashing out in grief – but again, they index his father, for joining FATE will force a response from him. A terrorist group dedicated to violently undoing Marcus’s work ironically allows Joshua to talk about his father to members equally opposed to him.

As for Clara’s father, like Archie, Darcus Bowden seems blissfully untroubled by any diasporic issues of belonging, for he spends

his life watching television due to “the most incredible lethargy” (*WT* 26). Resignation is possibly a reaction to his migrant status, but this is probably overstraining – Smith plays the character for the one-note gag of him responding to everything with ‘hmp,’ and the narrator notes dryly that he was “never the most vibrant of men” (*WT* 26). Yet as with the others, Darcus is a completely ineffectual father who does nothing to parent Clara, even after being gone for fourteen years. Clara reciprocates by giving little regard to him, not even referring to him as her father, saying “Darcus [and] my mudder” (*WT* 36).

The narrator does not suggest Archie is a father-figure for Clara, but there is the sentiment that after her dwindling of religious faith she seeks a new ‘savior,’ whether Ryan Topps or Archie. Ultimately, Clara settles for Archie, for “love is not such a hard thing to forfeit, not if you’ve never really felt it” (*WT* 40) after receiving no warmth as a child. While Clara is a caring mother, she resists Archie being absent from Irie’s life less than Alsana does with her boys, for Clara likely judges Archie from the poor example she experienced as a girl – and Hortense has no example, having never met her missing father, Captain Durham. No mention is made of Ambrosia’s father at all, and males are spottily recorded in the cacophonous Bowden family tree. It is only Ambrosia’s *mother* who is remembered for saying “don’ let me spit pon de floor” (*WT* 296). Where are the dads?

V. The Sins of the Fathers

Pulling together these threads, postcolonial issues of racism, identity, or migrant “unrootedness” (O’Grady 105) are certainly aggravants for the problems of the denizens in *White Teeth*. But a clear commonality among them is bad fathers. If Smith’s narrator muses that immigrants are “particularly prone to repetition” (*WT* 135), emotionally or physically absent fathers form a pattern reiterated in their children. Whether Smith intended such a meaning or not, it may be that just as immigrants “cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow” (*WT* 385), this depressing chain of poor fathers forms a thematic parallel.

Toward the novel's end, as the children enter adulthood, there is little to suggest that the cycle will be broken.

Magid perhaps bears the least scarring, though at the cost of a reserved and perhaps self-protective flippancy – like Willa Cather's Paul fingering his coat buttons, he seems dreamily above the storms surging around him. Magid's formal courtesy toward his father combines with a peculiar narcissism, for he surely could anticipate that ordering a bacon sandwich in Samad's favorite pub in front of his peers would provoke him. Millat's problems go deeper, for his alienation from his father undermines his sexual braggadocio – after breaking up with his girlfriend under KEVIN's tutelage, he wanders old haunts of his father and remembers “something his father once told him back when they used to speak to each other” (*WT* 311). Although he rages that “all his life he wanted a Godfather, and all he got was . . . a faulty, broken, stupid, one-handed waiter of a man” (*WT* 419), his actions start to ominously repeat Samad's – he begins to do shifts in the restaurant, and Hitch (115) notes that he replays Samad's binary thinking regarding identity and culture (115). While relatively sexually successful, he is similarly confused by his lusts (Meyer 488), causing Shiva to wonder “how many generations of Iqbals he'd have to give the same advice to” (*WT* 309). In turn, as much as Millat infuriates him, Samad may betray some empathy that, in contrast to his “Mr. Smarty-pants” (*WT* 375) elder son, Millat is “a Pandy deep down” (*WT* 436), someone who will “march onto the parade ground and fire the first shot” (*WT* 376). Just as Samad once did, Millat drugs himself as he braces to kill Dr. Perret and fails (Kwon 1229).

Joshua and Irie remain lesser-known quantities. Joshua's vector seems to be toward some accommodation to his all-science father, for he feels an unexpected family pride in realizing that his father will *not* “save the thing he loves” (*WT* 435) when Joshua is stage-threatened by FATE, but might choose to sacrifice his son for the FutureMouse©. Correspondingly, while Irie has a touching moment of intimacy with Archie by conversing on how bus tickets work (*WT* 427-428), and she plans to heal ‘roots’ by training as a dentist, alluding to the novel's extended leitmotif, Irie forebodingly resigns herself to being a “great make-doer” (*WT* 305) like her father, compounded by her settling for

clerical work. Just as Archie might, she applies a “folding policy” (*WT* 283) to Marcus’s paperwork.

The story closes with Irie and her “fatherless little girl” (*WT* 448) on a Jamaican beach. Critics have read Irie’s daughter as “a positive, forward-looking model of multicultural Englishness” (Bentley 500). This seems a facile portrait of a semi-orphaned child – while the narrator praises her as “free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings” (448), Joshua is implied as, but is not explicitly, a stepfather, and her male progenitors are not called parent(s) but “Bad Uncle Millat and Good Uncle Magid” (*WT* 448). The novel’s ending’s messages confuse or contradict, and Smith has conceded that “in the end I kind of threw up my hands and so do all of the characters really,” adding that the book’s close is not “particularly optimistic on that front” (qtd. in O’Grady 107), for while the story affirms hybridity and spontaneity, Irie’s daughter’s fatherlessness will logically propagate the same problems Irie, Clara, and Hortense suffered.

VI. Conclusion: What Does It Mean?

In total, while issues of trauma from migration or war inform the narrative, this reading endeavors to carve a space: *White Teeth*’s characters suffer from these phenomena, but it seems too coincidental that every major father in the novel abdicates or fails to perform his role. Archie is not a migrant, but is seldom present for Irie. Samad *is* a migrant, but is also usually gone and provides little fostering or rapport for his sons. Marcus circuits between the refrigerator and his office, giving his children limited concern as he pursues his experiments. Following the literature on father-hunger, particularly Balcom’s model, the novel’s children (or the adults formerly *as* children) all experience(d) or precipitate(d) either behaviors of emotional hurt which seek to replace or please a missing father, or of lashing out with confused anger or targeted attention-seeking acts. Further, there are textual hints anticipating that these behaviors will repeat in future generations.

To strain at further conjectures, a strength of this reading regarding *White Teeth* scholarship is hopefully its interest in absent fathers;

a limitation is that it does not really answer why the novel has so many. Among plausible causation chains, the novel's logic might imply that a) migrant trauma propagates bad fathers; or that b) bad fathers lead damaged people to migrate in the first place; or that c) the two factors are unconnected and at most aggravate each other. Selected characters fit these options, but not all of them. As to the first (a), Samad's lack of belonging and identity, in addition to the family's parlous finances because of his demeaning work as an immigrant, contributes to his poor fathering. But as to the second (b), Hortense's fatherlessness might equally have influenced her lack of belonging in Jamaica and encouraged her move to Britain. As to the third (c), it is *possible* that bad fathers are merely a plot device, following Leo Tolstoy's dictum that only unhappy families vary in their qualities. Studies of fictional fathers admit that sometimes a cigar is a cigar; but *White Teeth* has no noticeably good fathers to serve as a contrast or foil to the deficient ones, even as minor characters. Ryan Topps' pater is scorned by Hortense as "a terrible man, gambler and whoremonger" (WT 320), Merlin has rejected "his estranged father, the vicar of Snarebrook" (WT 17), and Millat's girlfriend Tanya Chapman-Jones provides him with sexual acts to spite her judge father (WT 367). No family seems functional.

A clue may inhere within the text's meaningful use of the term *involved* (WT 363). Perhaps hurt children of a feather flock together, and being damaged by overlapping trauma factors draws together the disparate families of the novel's community. In this way, Samad and Archie find an odd kinship, and Joshua instinctively feels that Irie is "one of his own" (WT 247), and, in a large London, it is significant that characters recurrently meet each other. A selective bias may be at play in that the background citizens of London who are *not* "involved" with the story's characters are seemingly less distressed – in her climactic outburst Irie argues that the bus is filled with people unlike them with a "peaceful existence" who "don't mind what their kids do in life as long as they're reasonably, you know, *healthy. Happy*" (WT 426).

In brief, the damage of bad fathering is intergenerational and repetitive in *White Teeth*, mutually intensifying the characters' migrant trauma but also possibly serving as a thematic corollary to it. *White Teeth*

is a complex engine. Its textual gears affirm a sort of regenerative embracing of fate and the productive chaos it engenders, often using genetic hybridity as a metaphor – as opposed to stagnancy or the “mythical normality” (Campbell-Hall 173) Samad inflexibly clings to. Yet father absence may validly inform and connect to the characters’ displacement crises. If so, the last sentence of *White Teeth* appends an amusing and warm coda referencing both interpretations – where Archie, lying injured and bleeding, finally and untypically acts as a nurturing father, telling the FutureMouse© with a sort of parting blessing to “go on my son!” (WT 448).

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