Language in *White Teeth* as a Tool of Cultural Hybridization

When the Iqbals utter Bengali phrases throughout Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, we are more or less left some context clues to gather their meaning, because Smith chose not to provide translations or a glossary. Realistic fiction interacts with and reflects real life in a way that tries to capture it honestly but also has the luxury of presenting itself in whatever way it desires. In her essay “The Politics of Everyday Hybridity,” Laura Moss deconstructs the term “cultural hybridity” and explains that Smith’s imagining of the term is “an eclectic mixture of race, language, and culture” (Moss 12). Language, the focus of this paper, is the primary tool of human communication and can be used to understand multicultural imperialist power dynamics. Zadie Smith presents us with a version of cultural hybridity by employing untranslated language, unapologetic instances of cultural exchange, and heteroglossia, and in doing so problematizes stable national identity. This paper will conclude that Smith’s choices in her fictional representation of multiculturalism in *White Teeth* both reflects the existence of cultural hybridity in reality as well as contributes to the normalization of it. More than that, the novel is a cultural artifact by its own merit because it is borne from that same multicultural society. First, I will explain the importance of balancing the historic power dynamic between the colonial authority and the colonial subject. Then, I will argue that untranslated Bengali in *White Teeth* succeeds in dismantling that dynamic. Finally, I will argue that this power re-balancing challenges “normal” conceptions of British identity and moves the center of what is considered “normal” closer to cultural hybridity.

A discussion of post-colonial power dynamics necessitates the examination of words like “assimilation” and “acculturation.” Acculturation in particular – adaptability to new social situations – has particularly asymmetric results in multicultural societies. Moss uses the terms
“colonial authority” and “colonial subject” to describe the historic power dynamic between those who fit the norm of a society and those who do not (Moss 12). Applied to postcolonial Britain, it implies that the colonial authorities are the white British characters and probably white or Western readers of the novel. In more relatable terms, I as a native Bengali-speaker possess an understanding of certain parts of White Teeth that an English-only speaker does not.

Untranslated phrases of other languages in English language books (like White Teeth) is not uncommon, and in fact the prevalence of this practice demonstrates that a glossary for a heteroglossia is nonessential and a crutch for readers that does not exist in real life. Matt Thomas’s evaluation of the novel in “Reading White Teeth to Improve Intercultural Communication” as “an allegorical novel” is valid because, as in White Teeth, an English-speaker overhearing immigrants speaking their native tongue also has no means of easy translation (Thomas 15). White Teeth “improve[s] cultural intercultural communication” and simultaneously balances a historic power dynamic because it places the burden of education on the upper end of the power spectrum. Providing a translation for English-speaking readers parallels the situation of the “colonial subject” holding responsibility for “the acculturation” of the “colonial authority” (Moss 12). Take media representation as an example. Those who have never experienced acculturation to a new society entirely foreign to them are accustomed to seeing people that look like them and do not experience their identity being erased in media. As such, White Teeth already hits a benchmark by virtue of simply having multiethnic characters. But that is merely a minimum standard. More saliently, a person reading a book with many multiethnic and non-Standard English speaking characters mimics the sort of dispossession that immigrants may feel in a white British space. The discomfort of not socially adapting parallels with the discomfort of not understanding another language. While the discomfort may be small,
especially for the casual reader, Smith clearly understands that this discomfort is necessary to even begin dismantling the authority/subject dynamic. The rest of this paper will provide evidence that *White Teeth*, in its depiction of realistic intercultural conversations, does significantly reverse the authority/subject dynamic.

The title “White Teeth” and the moments Smith chooses to have characters utter their native tongue (whether it is Bengali or non-standard English) demonstrate that the state of not understanding can be uncomfortable but at the same time extremely truthful. Smith connects teeth and speech with the notion of truth explicitly when Clara works to lose her non-standard dialect and wears false teeth: “That was a downright lie. False as her own white teeth” (Smith 294). Teeth, a significant factor in ‘proper’ speech, are characterized as true or false in the same way that speech can be true or false. Indeed, when Clara concludes that Captain Charlie Durham “wasn’t smart,” the same sentiment in her own dialect (“Captain Charlie Durham was a no-good djam fool bwoy”) contains more conviction (Smith 294). So, Smith implies that language — not just what is said but the way it is said — dictates the ‘truth’ of an exchange, especially in multicultural contexts.

Furthermore, Smith extends the relationship between language and truth when she chooses to withhold a truth from a character to which we as readers are privy. When Samad speaks to Poppy Burt-Jones, Smith is heavily satirizing the colonial authority/colonial subject dynamic, as Jones’ more or less benign remarks and questions contain a layer of ignorance and even racism while Samad’s responses blatantly play into her preconceptions. But when Samad tells her a Bengali phrase, “Amar durbol lagche,” his decision to withhold its meaning is profound. For he not only withholds its literal translation, “I feel weak,” but also its connotation of his desire for Poppy Burt-Jones (Smith 133). His fake translation, “closed-mouth worship of
the Creator,” while humorous, also draws sympathy and calls attention to the discomfort of only really being able to express a feeling in one’s native tongue. As such, Smith’s implicit message is that interlinguistic communication is only productive if the authority/subject dynamic is removed – which it was not for Samad and Poppy Burt-Jones – and all conversers extend a good faith effort to truly understand one another. Indeed, Samad does end up kissing Poppy, but only after she makes a bizarre generalization about Muslims and abstinence in a moment that Smith surely knows drips with irony that everyone understands except for Poppy.

Smith also examines the relationship between language and Islam in the novel as a method of negotiating a multicultural space. She does in fact provide English translations of the Prophet Muhammad’s hadith: “O Allah, I seek refuge in you from the evil of my hearing, of my sight, of my tongue, of my heart, and of my private parts” (Smith 116). This is very deliberate, since Samad’s interpretation of this text is based on its English translation, and his subsequent struggle with his sexuality is entirely based on the language translation of the text. Di Martino and Di Sabato provide a concise explanation for why translations can themselves be negotiations of immigrant identity:

What has perhaps not been duly considered is the sometimes totally different linguistic cartographies that practices of translation trace when compared to the mappings sketched in source texts and, consequently, the extent to which they actually reveal the continuous negotiation of space and identities characterising such linguistically rich and sophisticated novels as White Teeth (Di Martino and Di Sabato 100).

The beauty of Samad’s interpretation of the hadith text is that any reader could have interpreted it in any way, but we are instead brought to understand a practicing Muslim’s interpretation of it, which is so valuable in a society that still harbors stereotypes and misconceptions about the religion. Smith’s use of English translations of non-English texts in conjunction with a lack of translation for non-English phrases is powerful, since
the purpose of the former is to demonstrate a cultural practice. Small moments like this in *White Teeth* accrue into a larger narrative that normalize Muslim and West Indian identity in Great Britain.

Moreover, assimilation, a contentious topic in and of itself, is inherently at odds with language, because language barriers are generally incredibly difficult to overcome past a certain age. Thus, complete assimilation – whether or not that is desirable – cannot really exist unless languages begin disappearing from the cultural fabric. Smith’s novel laments this monolingual version of reality and rejects it by virtue of writing characters that speak so many different tongues. The Chalfens represent this colonial push for assimilation at the expense of non-Western culture in *White Teeth*. When Irie tries to reject her Jamaican heritage and dark skin, Smith demonstrates that social discomfort or the feeling of not belonging can dangerously “erase…one’s heritage (Thomas 21). On the flip side, Samad believes that one’s cultural roots are “what saved, the ropes one throws out to rescue drowning men” (Smith 161). Smith, then, is also implicitly critiquing parochialism and unswerving patriotism, the other extreme of the spectrum that Irie stands opposite of. Through Samad and Irie, Smith tells us that what is perhaps truly most conducive to social belonging and intercultural communication is some in-between space that is neither assimilation nor “blind adhesion to roots” (Rogers 50).

And yet, Smith acknowledges the difficulty and near impossibility of finding a “neutral place” (Smith 178). A novel that contains as much historical data as *White Teeth* is very self-aware about this. From the bloodshed of colonial history to the discussion of Salman Rushdie’s fatwa, Smith makes no concessions about “the sheer quantity of shit that must be wiped off the slate [of the past]” (Smith 178). Given the inevitability of history intervening in modern events, Smith is keenly aware of her immigrant story’s implications on a grand scale, and her own
opinion comes through: “[immigrants] step into their foreign lands as blank people…they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow” (Smith 384). Smith clearly supports the necessity of understanding the complexity of history and thus rejects cosmopolitanism that “glosses too easily over the past” (Rogers 53).

In a place where “[40] percent of children … are born to at least one non-white parent,” many Londoners probably experience multilingual conversations and multicultural spaces “as part of the practice of everyday life” (Moss 11). In their book *Studying Language through Literature: An Old Perspective Revisited and Something More*, Di Martino and Di Sabato argue that *White Teeth* “challenges a homogenous view of British identity through the polyphonic narration…in a plurality of voices and accents” (Di Martino and Di Sabato 99). On face value then, the simple existence of the mixed-race and ethnic hodge-podge of characters is true to life. I would argue, however, that while the “‘normalisation’ of hybridity” may well be commonplace in contemporary and postcolonial communities in and outside London, the same cannot be said of fictional representations of them (Moss 12). This means that Smith’s work is part of a living and evolving canon of literature that began the second a postcolonial writer penned the first multicultural space. Given that a work like Smith’s, a heteroglossia in the truest sense of the word, treats the assortment of languages as commonplace and the clashing of dialects with honesty, the larger effect is that her fictional London democratizes the city as a space for everyone. That is, when linguistic diversity is a natural element of a text produced by a multicultural society – which I would argue *White Teeth* most definitely is – it challenges the notion that ‘Britain is a place for English.’ The default can then gradually move toward ‘Britain is a place for Englishes’ or perhaps even ‘Britain is a place for Cockney, Bengali, Creole, and
Standard English.’ In this way, *White Teeth* as a cultural artifact contributes to moving the center of normality in a direction that more accurately reflects its multicultural truth.

Finally, language plays a key role when Samad asserts his identity in association with his name. As his demand of “Don’t call me Sam” points out, names that have roots in non-English languages are regularly mispronounced or shortened for the convenience of English speakers (Smith 94). Samad unequivocally rejects this, saying that he is “not one of your English matey-boys. My name is Samad Miah Iqbal. Not Sam. Not Sammy. And not – God forbid – Samuel. It is *Samad*” (Smith 94). The emphatic nature of this excerpt is a microcosm of Smith’s larger project in *White Teeth*. When push comes to shove for Samad, he unyieldingly stands by his given name, a gesture that rings loudly in multicultural society. Again, Smith, through Samad, gives the colonial subject power and takes some away from the colonial authority by disallowing the latter from misrepresenting the former’s identity. Since names are so intrinsic to people’s identities and often times emblematic of their cultural background, this moment is monumental in terms of normalizing “Other” identities in multicultural British society.

The confluence of the evidence provided thus far indicates that Smith believes cultural differences should not be avoided or overlooked and in fact ought to be acknowledged and confronted directly, despite at times being uncomfortable. Samad says to Mad Mary that “we are split people … in the end, your past is not my past and your truth is not my truth and your solution – it is not my solution” (Smith 150). As Rogers points out, Smith seems to sympathize with this interpretation (Rogers 54). By comparing the ways that society treats the mentally ill with the way they treat those of a different culture, Smith implicitly identifies a societal problem: society has an issue validating other people’s identities. As such, *White Teeth*, through its
cunning use of non-English languages and non-Standard English, makes strides in validating those identities.

Although it is littered with stories of historical tragedy, death as a result of fundamentalism, and countless instances of cultural ignorance, disrespect, and insensitivity, *White Teeth* is still an extraordinarily optimistic novel. While we – as in people living in multicultural societies – are still navigating the complexities of what that society entails, whether it is assimilation, cultural exchange, or some in-between space yet to be defined, Smith has created a fictional universe where perhaps that in-between does exist. The cartoonish characters and moments in the novel, while exaggerated and fraught with satire, very much reflect real life. If *White Teeth* is indeed a cultural artifact itself, then Smith’s contribution to the canon has implications beyond the realm of realistic fiction literature. Perhaps the “neutral place” we all seem to be searching for can first only exist within the safe but limitless fictional universe, an alternate reality of sorts, before we accept it as a cultural norm.
Bibliography


Process Reflection

This was one of those papers that I found very rewarding the further I got into writing it. I also felt that I was able to gain a better understanding of my own argument throughout the writing and editing process. While I recognize that the topic of my paper (cultural exchange, assimilation, negotiating multicultural spaces, etc.) could be the subject of an entire doctoral thesis. However, since I focused the paper on just language, I think I’ve managed to put forth a sound argument about my thesis. Language itself is complex and such an integral part of the way we communicate with each other and understand other cultures, which is why I wanted to focus on it. Also, since I am a native Bengali speaker, I wanted to explore that reading experience in a critical and academic setting.