



Kent Academic Repository

Scott, Jeremy (2007) *Shared and Told Tales: Multiculturalism and Participatory Narrative Identities in Zadie Smith's 'White Teeth'*. *International Journal of the Humanities*, 5 (10). pp. 207-214. ISSN 1447-9508.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/3267/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<http://ijhar.cgpublisher.com/>

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC0 (Public Domain)

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal**, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

The International
JOURNAL
of the HUMANITIES

Volume 5

Shared and Told Tales: Multiculturalism and
Participatory Narrative Identities in Zadie Smith's
'White Teeth'

Jeremy David Scott

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES
<http://www.Humanities-Journal.com>

First published in 2007 in Melbourne, Australia by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd
www.CommonGroundPublishing.com.

© 2007 (individual papers), the author(s)
© 2007 (selection and editorial matter) Common Ground

Authors are responsible for the accuracy of citations, quotations, diagrams, tables and maps.

All rights reserved. Apart from fair use for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act (Australia), no part of this work may be reproduced without written permission from the publisher. For permissions and other inquiries, please contact cg-support@commongroundpublishing.com.

ISSN: 1447-9508
Publisher Site: <http://www.Humanities-Journal.com>

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES is a peer refereed journal. Full papers submitted for publication are refereed by Associate Editors through anonymous referee processes.

Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel typesetting system
<http://www.CommonGroundSoftware.com>.

Shared and Told Tales: Multiculturalism and Participatory Narrative Identities in Zadie Smith's 'White Teeth'

Jeremy David Scott, University of Kent, Kent, UK

*Abstract: This paper proposes that Zadie Smith's novel 'White Teeth' enacts an intriguing response to current debates surrounding multiculturalism and identity in contemporary England through its insistence on the value of shared and participatory narratives. This issue is very much of the moment, given current debates within these islands on globalisation, on the post-devolution climate of the UK and its modern place in the world, and on matters connected to migration and shared identity. Firstly, Salman Rushdie's views on multiculturalism will be explored; principally, his view of the concept as a 'cop-out' and his call for a 'third way' which lies somewhere in between laissez-faire multiculturalism and outright assimilation. A paradigm of this vision may be found in the portrayal of Delhi in *Midnight's Children*, and there are parallels to be drawn between Rushdie's Delhi and Smith's London. Following this, Homi Bhabha's theories on the relationship between identity and narrative form will be discussed and applied, i.e. of pedagogic (passively received) notions of national history versus performative (shared constructions) of it. 'White Teeth' illustrates both the potentialities and pitfalls of multiculturalism, and sees a resolution in a Bhabha-like sharing of stories. Samad's and Archie's lives criss-cross, part and reunite, until at the end Samad remarks: 'This ... will keep us two boys going for the next forty years. It's the story to end all stories. It is the gift that keeps on giving.' The two protagonists have completed a shared re-telling of their life stories, and thus a joint construction through narrative of shared history and, perhaps, shared identity.*

Keywords: Narrative Theory, Narrative Technique, Free Indirect Discourse, Multiculturalism, Identity, The Novel, Homi Bhabha, Zadie Smith, Contemporary English Fiction

IN THE INTRODUCTION to an essay on Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Dominic Head makes reference to two contrasting photographs of the author Zadie Smith as she appears in the first two published editions of her novel. In the first, wearing glasses and with gathered hair, she appears studious, academic almost – the paragon of the young, literary, *serious* writer. In the second, she exudes something approaching glamour – or, to use the argot of the age, 'celebrity' – with loose hair, the glasses removed and make-up revealed by the full-colour print. As Head points out, this is partly a question of marketing; however, perhaps it is also the result of an ambition to send out an image which verges on the 'post-ethnic'¹. Smith's image presents a *tabula rasa* upon which the multifarious readers who make up the book's target constituency may inscribe their own conceptions of identity. In short, she is projected as a cosmopolitan, chameleon-like 'everywoman'. This ability to adopt different guises (however much it might have been imposed by publishers and agents) or to show different faces to the world is emblematic of a particular kind of cultural (as well as ethnic) hybridity. To extend the analogy further: hybridity, or a Janus-like ability to face in two different directions at once, to orientate oneself

both outwards and inwards, lies at the heart of Smith's novelistic response to the complex questions of cultural, communal, regional and/or national identity which seem very much of the zeitgeist at the beginning of this globalised century. Smith, born in Willesden green and, like her character Irie, of a Jamaican mother and an English father, has been specifically singled-out and then marketed as the literary voice and epitome of multicultural England. As such, she is an ideal writer to investigate for responses to the complex questions of imagining, representing and, more specifically in the terms of this essay, *narrating* and *voicing* this particular constituency. If Smith can adopt different states and guises according to purpose, then so too, appropriately, does her narrative voice. Thus, it is through renegotiated forms of hybridity – of both the identities which the characters explore and encapsulate and of the very narrative technique though which they are represented – that Smith begins to forge a redemptive, celebratory representation of multicultural, multi-faced, yet somehow (just) coherent London.

Smith's novelistic vision, then, is very much of its time. Complex and interweaving dramas of identity and national affiliation are being played out in Britain today within all of its constituent countries

¹ Dominic Head, 'Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*', in *Contemporary British Fiction*, (eds.) Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (Cambridge: Polity 2003), p. 106



(in correspondingly different ways and with correspondingly different focuses), and, obviously, the migrant is a central figure in the cast. Smith, however, is attempting to voice a particular part of this mix: the third-generation, post-war immigrant into London for whom the concrete experience of migrancy and exile has become distant and the unbearable weight of roots is no longer felt so acutely. Smith's novel focuses on the experience of moving from a state of transition (a context which Homi Bhabha has termed 'liminal'²) into one of *belonging*. In this respect, *White Teeth* presents an intriguing and timely investigation of the questions of cultural identity which accrue around that hugely diverse group of people calling London, England, home. To return to the central thesis of this essay, Smith's investigation comes in two forms: through the sharing of narrative, or more specifically, the participatory experience of narrative on the one hand, and the ways in which those narratives are voiced in the fictional discourse on the other. The novel comprises a vision of a shared, hybrid future (and past), and as such is aspirational, running as a gratifying counter-current to the prevailing cynicism which so often surrounds contemporary discussion of these issues. This cynicism is to be found on both sides of the debate: in the bemoaning of a perceived loss of heritage, shared values and national unity on one side, and in the open-palmed disavowal of any kind of coherence or the need for it – an appeal to a kind of nebulous post-nationalism or cosmopolitanism – on the other.

An important issue to address in the process of contextualising the novel (and one which features regularly in the media at the time of writing) is found in the murky no-man's land which lies between the twin poles of *multiculturalism* and *assimilation*. Salman Rushdie indirectly associates the latter term with a new kind of imperialism which attempts to assimilate immigrants into 'the last colony of the British Empire' (after E.P. Thompson), as though the borders of British colonialism have now retreated to encase the shores of the island itself.³ Neither, however, is he sympathetic to tokenist, laissez-faire multiculturalism, which he saw as something of a 'cop-out' at the time of the term's coming to the fore in the early 1980s.

... Now there's a new catchword: 'multiculturalism'. In our schools, this means little more than teaching the kids a few bongo rhythms, how to tie a sari and so forth. In the police training programme, it means telling cadets that black people are so 'culturally different' that

they can't help making trouble. Multiculturalism is the latest token gesture towards Britain's blacks, and it ought to be exposed, like 'integration' and 'racial harmony', for the sham it is.⁴

In practical terms, Rushdie's solution involves 'facing up to and eradicating the prejudices' within white society⁵; however, his particular fictional response to the issue is perhaps to be found in the post-ethnic, post-religious definitions of spaces as envisaged in the Delhi of *Midnight's Children*. The imagined London Smith paints shimmering above the real city is in many ways redolent of Rushdie's Delhi: secularised, non-denominational, gloriously multifaceted, to an extent ghettoised, but, somehow, crucially, coherent and definable. Whether or not the totems of multiculturalism are as glib and insubstantial as Rushdie and others (including a swathe of contemporary commentators) have suggested, Smith satirises them too. Throughout the pages of *White Teeth*, a sneer in the direction of 'Happy Multicultural Land' is easily discernible between the lines of the mannered narrative voice.

What is her prescription, then? The post-migrant identity is by its very nature a transitional one, characterised by continual reassessment and redefinition (i.e. it is *liminal* – the migrant exists at the borders of the nation, and is in a state of transition from one 'place', one culture, to the next). Accordingly, since World War II, writers from this constituency have been involved in an ongoing process of rewriting and redefining the nation body from within – of *renegotiating* the idea of nation. Writers such as Rushdie himself and, for example, Hanif Kureishi have been an integral part of this process, and Smith appears to borrow from both writers in yet another hybridisation: the meandering, polyphonic, cyclical style of Rushdie grafted onto the sharply observational urban realism of Kureishi. These writers have been gradually confronting, and then chipping away at, the obstacles to a meaningful hybridity – the same obstacles which prevent a moving out of the liminal state. The next step in this process is chronicled and illustrated in the course of *White Teeth*: moving into the cultural space previously dominated by 'the natives', and beginning to write from *within* instead of *without*. The literature which has evolved out of the experience of migrancy and liminality has 'talked back' to the centre and had a broadly centripetal effect, transforming (and renegotiating) the body of English Literature itself.

Dominic Head also cites Bhabha's work in this connection on the relationship between 'nation' and

² Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge 2004), p. 148

³ Salman Rushdie, 'The New Empire Within Britain', in *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books 1991), p. 130

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138

'narration'⁶. Bhabha has identified two contradictory but interacting forces within the creation of cultural constructions of national identity through narrative. In the first place, he writes (with reference to Claude Lefort) of a dominant *pedagogic* tendency to assert a particular narrative (or version) of nationhood; in other words, *received* or past versions of the history and lifeblood of the nation body. Running contrary to this force but operating together with it, Bhabha speaks of the *performative* processes of constructing the nation, a 'living principle'; in short, *enacted* or future versions of the nation.

The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performative interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*.⁷

The 'minority' will, Bhabha proposes, interrogate, or at the very least problematise, the narrative of the nation, supplementing, fragmenting and subsequently renegotiating it. In the process, the very conception of the nation space will be redefined. Migrant communities insinuate themselves into the national discourse, forcing recognition and acknowledgement, and then join in the subsequent re-articulation of this discourse. Part of this re-articulation can take place through the genre of narrative fiction itself, and it is here where the grounds for optimism can be located which, as was suggested at the beginning of this essay, run contrary to the prevailing forces of cynicism.

White Teeth, then, can be read as an exemplar of this process of renegotiation through narrative fiction and, further, as a castigation of conceptions of ethnicity as a 'neutral gear' for notions of identity. The book centres around three families who represent three 'strands' or groupings: the Chalfens ('more English than the English'), liberal, middle-class, well-meaning – but remorselessly satirised. It subsequently emerges that they are third-generation Poles and, therefore, not 'more English than the English' (but in fact, it could be argued, as English as anybody else). Joyce Chalfen herself provides a handy and transparent distillation of this idea in her musings on horticultural practice, producing a 'manifesto' for the novel:

If it is not too far-fetched a comparison, the sexual and cultural revolution we have experienced these past two decades is not a million miles away from the horticultural revolution that has taken place in our herbaceous borders and sunken beds. Where once we were satisfied with our biennials, poorly coloured flowers thrusting weakly out of the earth and blooming a few times a year (if we were lucky), now we are demanding both variety and continuity in our flowers [...]. Where once gardeners swore by the reliability of the self-pollinating plant in which pollen is transferred from the stamen to the stigma of the same flower (autogamy), now we are more adventurous, positively singing the praises of cross-pollination where pollen is transferred from one flower to another on the same plant (geitonogamy), or to a flower of another plant of the same species (xenogamy). The birds and the bees, the thick haze of pollen – these are all to be encouraged! [...] In the garden, as in the social and political arena, change should be the only constant. Our parents and our parents' petunias have learnt this lesson the hard way. The March of History is unsentimental, tramping over a generation and its annuals with ruthless determination.

The fact is, cross-pollination produces more varied offspring that are better able to cope with a changed environment. It is said cross-pollinating plants also tend to produce more and better quality seeds. If my one-year-old son is anything to go by (a cross-pollination between a lapsed-Catholic horticulturalist feminist, and an intellectual Jew!), then I can certainly vouch for the truth of this. [...] If we wish to provide happy playgrounds for our children, and corners of contemplation for our husbands, we need to create gardens of diversity and interest.⁸

Then there are the Iqbals, who arrived in England from Bangladesh in 1973 and who were forced by bigotry and racism to flee from the East End to Willesden. The couple's twin sons, Magid and Millat, both see their 'roots', and thus their identities, as lying elsewhere; they exist still in Bhabha's liminal state. Millat looks first to America, and then to a form of Islamic fundamentalism, joining the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Nation, whose acronym, perhaps a little too neatly, provides extra satirising effect. Magid, on the other hand, travels to India before training as a 'pukka English' barrister, as their father Samad ruefully recounts:

⁶ Op. cit., Head pp. 110-1

⁷ Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation', in *Nation and Narration*, (ed.) Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge 2006), p. 291-322 (p. 297)

⁸ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (Penguin 2000), pp.309-10 [all subsequent references to this edition]

‘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,’ said Samad bitterly, betraying the English inflections of twenty years in the country. ‘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 started ... 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 an animal finally house-trained. Who would want to stay? But you have made a devil’s pact ... it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognisable, you belong nowhere.’ p. 407

Samad’s attempts to shape and dictate the identities of his children are doomed to failure. So too, Smith implies, are those of any pedagogic discourse of nationhood.

The Iqbals also help to develop and sustain Smith’s undermining of ‘ethnic’ notions of received identity, as in the following episode where Alsana Iqbal finds out triumphantly that her ancestors were ‘Indo-Aryan’:

Alsana took out BALTIC-BRAIN, number 3 of their 24-set *Reader’s Digest Encyclopedia*, and read from the relevant section:

The vast majority of Bangladesh’s inhabitants are Bengalis, who are largely descended from Indo-Aryans who began to migrate into the country from the west thousands of years ago and who mixed within Bengal with indigenous groups of various racial stocks. Ethnic minorities include the Chakma and Mogh, Mongoloid peoples who live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts District; the Santal, mainly descended from migrants from present-day India; and the Biharis, non-Bengali Muslims who migrated from India after the partition.

‘Oi, mister! Indo-Aryans ... it looks like I am Western after all! Maybe I should listen to Tina Turner, wear the itsy-bitsy leather skirts. Pah. It just goes to show,’ said Alsana, revealing her English tongue, ‘you go back and back and back and it’s still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It’s a fairy tale!’ p. 236

The last family (and corresponding theme) can be found in the Joneses, Archie and Clara and their ‘hybrid’ daughter Irie who, it could be argued, appears as Smith’s surrogate in the text. Irie initially turns back to Jamaica for her roots, but then concludes, triumphantly, that ‘roots don’t matter anymore ... because they can’t because they mustn’t because they’re too long and they’re too torturous and they’re just buried too damn deep.’ (p. 527) It is here – in the digging up or casting off of roots – that Smith’s redemptive vision of the future beings to take form. Crucially, Irie ‘looks forward to it’; as suggested, the vision is a positive one. However, the vision is discernible even more clearly in the friendship between the two principle characters of the novel.

If the novel contains three narrative strands which help to encapsulate its themes, then these cohere around the book’s fulcrum: the relationship between Samad Iqbal and Archie Jones. It is here that Smith’s prescription for the future takes its final form. The two characters meet whilst serving in World War II, and, intriguingly, it is this cataclysmic event in British history which still so often acts as the pedagogic narrative of England’s identity (witness sections of the medias’ return to World War II imagery every time England play Germany at football, and the chanting of World War II songs and slogans by many of the crowd). There is an episode in the novel where Samad and Archie capture a French scientist, Dr. Perret, who is purported – appropriately enough in thematic terms – to have worked on Nazi sterilisation and eugenics programmes. Samad decides that Archie should execute the scientist there and then, and that this will make them heroes back in England. Archie duly disappears with the doctor, a shot is heard, and then Archie comes limping back with a bullet lodged in his thigh. The true course of events is not yet revealed to the reader, and the mystery installed here is directly connected to the novel’s central themes and comes to a head in its ending. This finale revolves around the launch of ‘FutureMouse’, a genetically modified mouse engineered to live for exactly seven years and to suffer predetermined genetic defects and diseases (principally, cancer) at set intervals. The mouse’s creator/inventor is the aforementioned Marcus Chalfen, and the unveiling of FutureMouse is to take place at the Perret Institute, whose eponymous benefactor is none other than the Dr. Perret who Archie was supposed to have executed in Africa. At this point, a further complication is introduced. Millat Iqbal, the Islamic fundamentalist, attempts to assassinate Dr. Perret in protest at the launch; and, yet again, Archie Jones intervenes to save the doctor, diving into the path of the bullet, taking another one in the thigh, and yet again ‘sparing’ Perret’s life. FutureMouse escapes from its cage

and runs away, taking with it, it would seem, all misguided notions of ethnic purity and the ability of humankind to breed the master race. 'You are all hybrids,' it seems to say, and this hybridity is something to be celebrated. As illustrated by Joyce Chalfen's exposition on cross-pollination and Alsana Iqbal's discovery of her ancestral roots, this theme is ubiquitous in the novel.

Aside from this direct development of central themes, there is another important interpretation of the chain of events that precipitates and then sustains Archie's and Samad's friendship; as Head has pointed out⁹, it lies within the act of the shared and participatory telling of stories. At first, Samad feels betrayed and let down by Archie. Later, however, he experiences an epiphany:

And then, with a certain horrid glee, he [Samad] gets to the fundamental truth of it, the anagnorisis: *This incident alone will keep us two old boys going for the next forty years.* It is the story to end all stories. It is the gift that keeps on giving. p. 533

In other words, he and Archie have taken part in a *performative* conception of narrative, a joint re-telling of the past and, thus, a shared renegotiation of history. Herein lies the possible salvation of shared futures, as the characters are able to simultaneously become pedagogic objects (the centre of their own implausibly coincidence-laden story) and performative subjects (the tellers and re-tellers of that tale). They are *voicing*, and then *re-voicing* a shared narrative.

This is more than just a thematic concern, though; it is enacted through the narrative methodology of the novel itself. The narrative situation in general makes use of an omniscient (heterodiegetic) narrator using a third-person register. This narrator is anything but neutral and detached, though, and is adamant and fastidious about guiding our perceptions of its characters and bringing out the central themes of the text. There is still space, however, for the voices of the novel's many characters to chorus from either side of this central narrative discourse. As can be seen in the excerpt quoted above, these voices can find form in direct thought ('This incident alone will keep us two old boys going for the next forty years') and, of course, direct speech. However, most interestingly, Smith makes a great deal of use of free indirect discourse ('It is the story to end all stories. It is the gift that keeps on giving'). Dorrit Cohn defines free indirect discourse as follows (using the German term *erlebte Rede*, or 'narrated monologue'):

...the renderings of a character's thoughts in his own idiom, while maintaining the third-person form of narration. Its transposition into present tense and first person ... yields an interior monologue. It would appear ... that these two techniques for rendering a character's psyche differ only by simple grammatical details. But when we see *erlebte Rede* in a surrounding epic context, its distinctiveness becomes clear: by maintaining the person and tense of authorial narration, it enables the author to recount the character's silent thoughts without a break in the narrative thread.¹⁰

Peter Cobley is more specific:

[Free indirect discourse is a] term which refers to an extension of the mixed mode of mimesis and the poet's or narrator's voice. In free indirect discourse, the voice of the character becomes embedded in the voice of the narrator; thus, the character's habit of speech is present, *but direct imitation* and quotation marks are not.¹¹

Some brief examples from the novel should suffice to illustrate the effect of this technique, and also to demonstrate how it connects to the theme of participatory narration:

The way Archie saw it, country people should die in the country and city people should die in the city. Only proper. *In death as he was in life* and all that. It made sense that Archie should die on this nasty urban street where he had ended up, living alone at the age of forty-seven, in a one-bedroom flat above a deserted chip shop. He wasn't the type to make elaborate plans – suicide notes and funeral instructions – he wasn't the type for anything fancy. All he asked for was a bit of silence, a bit of *shush* so he could concentrate. He wanted it to be perfectly quiet and still, like the inside of an empty confessional box or the moment in the brain before thought and speech. He wanted to do it before the shops opened. p. 4

The first sentence is pure diegetic narration, but the second and third ('Only proper...', '*In death...*') begin to suggest the voice of the character, especially in the demotic 'and all that.' The fourth, fifth and sixth remain rooted in a register of diegetic narration – past tense, third-person – yet, crucially, are redolent of Archie's discourse and thus locate themselves within the sphere of his subjectivity. Note especially

⁹ Op. cit., Head p. 115

¹⁰ Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: narrative modes for presenting consciousness in fiction* (Princeton University Press 1998)

¹¹ Paul Cobley, *Narrative* (London: Routledge 2001), p. 231

‘a bit of silence, a bit of *shush*’ (pure Archie-isms) before the return of the narrator’s voice to handle the more adroit line evoking the peace of the confessional or the silence of the brain ‘before thought and speech’. The last line, then, returns to Archie’s perspective. There is a blending of the external perspective of the heterodiegetic narrator with the more subjective one of the character himself.

Free indirect discourse also occurs in those parts of the narration concerned with Samad:

She began rifling through the catastrophe of her desk, and Samad leant back once more on his stool, taking what little satisfaction he could from the fact that her fingers, if he was not mistaken, appeared to be trembling. Had there been *a moment*, just then? He was fifty-seven – it was a good ten years since he’d had a moment – he was not at all sure he would recognise a moment if one came along. *You old man*, he told himself as he dabbed at his face with a handkerchief, *you old fool*. Leave now – leave before you drown in your own guilty excrescence (for he was sweating like a pig), *leave before you make it worse*. But was it possible? Was it possible that this past month – the month that he had been squeezing and spilling, praying and begging, making deals and thinking, thinking always about her – that she had been thinking of *him*? p. 158

Parts of this paragraph could be changed to direct thought (or internal monologue) simply by altering tense and pronouns: ‘Was there *a moment*, just then? I’m fifty-seven – it’s a good ten years since I’ve had a moment – I’m not at all sure I would recognise a moment if one came along.’ This is symptomatic of the *proximity* of the narrative discourse to Samad’s perspective, but the fact that the line beginning ‘I’m not at all sure...’ does not quite ring true with the wider tone of Archie’s voice confirms that a tantalising gap between the voices of character and narrator is still maintained, and the narrative voice is free to fluctuate between the two agencies. Accordingly, the next italicised line is pure direct thought: ‘*You old man ... you old fool*.’ The italics then disappear, indicating a shift back towards the narrator for the next, more externalised observation which requires a more ‘writerly’ register (‘leave before *you* drown in *your* own guilty excrescence’ [my emphasis]). Then, the direct thought returns, followed by more free indirect discourse (‘But was it possible ... that

she had been thinking of *him*?’). Where more ‘writerly’, poetic articulation is required, Smith is free to intervene; where possible, though, she will allow a discourse centred on the character to remain in control.

To summarise: there are two strands to Smith’s fictional attempt to capture the multifariousness of contemporary London. The first comes about by virtue of the act of telling shared stories itself, and appeals to the power of these shared narratives (or a shared, participatory version of history), what Head calls ‘the narrative lifeblood of all postcolonial futures’¹², to be found in the shared histories of Archie and Samad. If national identity cannot be genetically engineered, then perhaps it can be *culturally* engineered in the space where pedagogic and performative conceptions of narratives intersect. Secondly, this theme is borne out, enacted, even, by the very narrative methodology of the novel. Its use of free indirect discourse engenders a situation whereby the narrator appears to be ceding control of the narrative discourse to character (whichever character happens to be the focus of the fiction at that point), almost in the manner in which a beam of light will be deflected from its course by the presence of a planet. For ‘light’ read *narrative discourse*; for ‘planet’, read *character*. And so the characters themselves, by sleight of hand, appear at times to be narrating themselves, and the border between mimesis and diegesis, between ‘showing’ and ‘telling’, becomes blurred. The narrative voice itself, like the characters it evokes for the reader, begins to move beyond liminality and into ‘belonging’.

Is Smith, then, implying the desirability of a form of postcolonial, postnational humanism (a *cosmopolitanism*), as many critics and reviewers appear to suggest? Rather, it could be argued that she acknowledges the fact that such a goal ignores the very human need to feel part of a shared community, operating on a relatively local level, with all its accompanying trappings of shared histories and stories and a definable, coherent and aspirational ongoing narrative. The crucial point is that this narrative must be performative, participatory, inclusive, shared – and Janus-faced, with one face looking backwards in acknowledgement, but the dominant one fixed forwards, facing determinedly in the direction of travel. As the epigraph to the novel from *The Tempest* proclaims, chiming with the defiant and celebratory escape of FutureMouse from the pedagogic confines of the Perret Institute: ‘What is past, is prologue.’

¹² Op. cit., Head p. 115

References

- Bhabha, Homi, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990)
- Childs, Peter, 'Zadie Smith: searching for the inescapable', in *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction since 1970* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2005)
- Cobley, Paul, *Narrative* (London: Routledge 2002)
- Cohn, Dorrit, *Transparent Minds: narrative modes for presenting consciousness in fiction* (Princeton University Press 1998)
- Head, Dominic, 'Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*', in *Contemporary British Fiction*, eds. Lane, Mengham and Tew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003)
- Hernadi, Paul, 'Dual Perspective: free indirect discourse and related techniques', *Comparative Literature*, 24 (1) (Winter 1972), pp. 32-43
- Rushdie, Salman, 'The New Empire Within Britain', in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991)

About the Author

Dr. Jeremy David Scott

I was awarded my PhD in 2005 and teach at the University of Kent in the areas of contemporary fiction, narratology, stylistics, discourse analysis, critical theory and general English literature. I also teach creative writing, and am a published fiction writer. My current research interests include fictional technique, literary representations of dialect, the relationship between narratives and identity, and fictional versions of Englishness. I have published on contemporary British and Irish fiction, on James Joyce. A new collection of short stories and a book on demotic narrative voices in contemporary fiction are both forthcoming in 2008.

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES

EDITORS

Tom Nairn, RMIT University, Melbourne.

Mary Kalantzis, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

Patrick Baert, Cambridge University, UK.

David Christian, San Diego State University, California, USA.

Bill Cope, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.

Mick Dodson, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

Hafedh Halila, Institut Supérieur des Langues de Tunis, Tunisia.

Ted Honderich, University College, London.

Paul James, RMIT University, Australia.

Moncef Jazzar, Institut Supérieur des Langues de Tunis, Tunisia.

Eleni Karantzola, University of the Aegean, Greece.

Bill Kent, Monash Centre, Prato, Italy.

Krishan Kumar, University of Virginia, USA.

Ayat Labadi, Institut Supérieur des Langues de Tunis, Tunisia.

Greg Levine, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.

Fethi Mansouri, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia.

Juliet Mitchell, Cambridge University, UK.

Nikos Papastergiadis, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Robert Pascoe, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia.

Scott Schaffer, Millersville University, USA.

Jeffrey T. Schnapp, Stanford University, USA.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Columbia University, USA.

Giorgos Tsiakalos, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

Siva Vaidhyanathan, New York University, USA.

Hortensia Beatriz Vera Lopez, University of Nottingham, UK.

Chris Ziguas, RMIT University, Australia.

Please visit the Journal website at <http://www.Humanities-Journal.com> for further information:

- ABOUT the Journal including Scope and Concerns, Editors, Advisory Board, Associate Editors and Journal Profile
- FOR AUTHORS including Publishing Policy, Submission Guidelines, Peer Review Process and Publishing Agreement

SUBSCRIPTIONS

The Journal offers individual and institutional subscriptions. For further information please visit <http://ijh.cgpublisher.com/subscriptions.html>. Inquiries can be directed to subscriptions@commongroundpublishing.com

INQUIRIES

Email: cg-support@commongroundpublishing.com