

**“WHAT’S PAST IS PROLOGUE”:  
THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY IN  
ZADIE SMITH’S *WHITE TEETH***

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IN HER popular and critically acclaimed debut *White Teeth* (first published in 2000). Zadie Smith chronicles the life of Bengali immigrants in England through the family of Samad Iqbal, a Muslim waiter working in London, and of immigrants from the Caribbean through the family of Clara Jones, a Jamaican married to an Englishman Archie Jones. The novel does not only focus on an extraordinary (and unexpected) life-long friendship between Samad and Archie, but Smith also concentrates on how their families and mainly their children cope with life in a multi-cultural London society, where they have to overcome identity crises and strive for self-realisation. Apart from providing a glimpse into the future of the Iqbal and Jones offspring, the author gives us a taste of how the colonial history of the former British Empire influences the lives of the two families. In other words, Smith explores the links between national (or racial) history of the country and the personal history of the immigrants and multi-ethnic families portrayed in her astonishing debut.

For Zadie Smith, the history is so crucial that she begins her novel with a line borrowed from William Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*, which says the following: “What’s past is prologue.” According to Clare Squires, the introductory line suggests that “[h]istory and the past are formative and inescapable for the novel’s characters” (quoted in Arikan 1683). Some of the readers would not even notice it, but those who pay a special attention to all the pages of the book, will certainly bear the line in their minds throughout the story, while trying to understand its meaning and significance in it. Smith does not hide that in her novel, the readers will move back and forth in the destinies of the characters, as it is clearly indicated in the names of the

chapters. This way it is evident that the lives of her characters span a few decades, beginning during the Second World War and ending at the end of the second millennium. But it is not only about spanning half a century. Smith's opening line wants to imply much more than that. The past that serves as a prologue to the novel is both national and personal.

The national (or racial) past includes the years of British colonial era, its imperialism in the East Indies and the Caribbean, the years of the World War II and the subsequent decolonisation. It is the past that is still kept in the minds of Smith's older characters, i.e. her first-generation immigrants. They experienced British colonialism in their lives, they have memories of its effects on their home countries and in a way these memories influence the way they think about England, which is now their new home. On the other hand, the personal past is typical for the second-generation immigrants, i.e. the children of Samad and Archie. In the process of their identity formation, these young characters try to explore the personal histories of their families and on the basis of its knowing (or not knowing), they decide upon their future. In this sense, the national and personal pasts are naturally and inevitably interwoven. In the novel, the national past serves as a background of her characters' personal past, because their thoughts and decisions about the future depend on their historical consciousness (or the lack of it).

One of the passages that brings us closer to the issue of history or past appears in a chapter dedicated to Samad Iqbal. In *The Temptation of Samad Iqbal*, we read about Samad's problems with assimilation to the British society and his strict sticking to Muslim culture at the expense of the culture of the dominant British society. However, we learn that even though Samad has a strong aversion to assimilation, he is not able to realise that subconsciously, the Western lifestyle has infiltrated under his skin. He finds a lover, Poppy Burt-Jones – a music teacher of his two sons – who attracts him enormously and, what is even more tragic in Samad's view, and she is the cause of two sins that he commits, despite realising the possibility of Allah's tremendous wrath: masturbation and heavy drinking. It seems that having a lover does not need to be the most terrible mistake; in fact, it is the knowledge that Poppy is English that confuses Samad. In the following conversation between Samad and

Shiva, Samad's colleague at restaurant where he works, Shiva implies the reason why such a relationship can never work:

"When are you next seeing her?"

"We are meeting for school-related business . . . the first Wednesday of September."

"I see. Is she Hindu? Muslim? She ain't Sikh, is she?"

"That is the worst of it," said Samad, his voice breaking. "English. White. English."

Shiva shook his head. "I been out with a lot of white birds, Samad. A lot. Sometimes it's worked, sometimes it ain't. Two lovely American girls. Fell head-over-heels for a Parisian stunner. Even spent a year with a Romanian. But never an English girl. Never works. Never."

"Why?" asked Samad, attacking his thumbnails with his teeth and awaiting some fearful answer, some edict from on high. "Why not, Shiva Bhagwati?"

"Too much history," was Shiva's enigmatic answer, as he dished up the Chicken Bhuna. "Too much bloody history." (Smith 2001, 145-6)

Even though Shiva does not say more, for a person familiar with the history of the British Empire it is obvious that the "bloody history" refers to the centuries of British rule in the East Indies, especially in what is now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Of all the British colonies, India was considered to be the brightest jewel in the crown, a region which—in British view—needed much of the colonizer's attention. According to P. J. Marshall, the British presence in the East Indies began in the 1760s and lasted until 1947 when India acquired independence. During the time, "the area . . . was either under direct British rule or governed by princes who were subordinate allies of the British" (1996, 358). Naturally, not everyone was happy about being ruled by a different country. That was the reason why the presence of the British in the East Indies was often complicated by several risings and rebellions. One of the most serious rebellions took place in 1857. The Mutiny, the name under which the event went down in history, is often considered to be the First War of Independence. It was led by discontent Indian peasantry in a brutal way, and it was suppressed in an equally brutal way by the British. Since 1858, the entire Indian subcontinent was ruled by a centralised British govern-

ment and there was no one left to challenge the British authority (Marshal 1996, 359).

The Empire had its own explanation for such an expansion of its rule. It was based on the popular, but erroneous generalisation derived from Darwin's theory of evolution. According to the belief spread among the contemporary British, the primary goal of the Empire was not the economic or cultural benefit of Britain itself, but it was a natural duty of a developed nation to turn the primitive nations, under British guidance, into civilised and Christianized ones. This doctrine was either naively accepted by some, or hugely criticised by others, but in its effect, it served as a good tool to legitimise Britain's patrol over some countries in Africa (Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa) and East Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh).

Those who were born in colonies but grew up in England—where they received a typical English education—usually belonged to the group of people who viewed the British imperialistic rule in its colonies positively. They experienced the modernism of British lifestyle themselves and therefore approved of the efforts of the British to develop the nations under their control. One of the most notorious examples in this sense is Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), the author of the famous *The Jungle Book*. He was born in Bombay in what was then British India. When he was five years old, he and his younger sister were taken to England, where Kipling received an English education and fully embraced the English way of life. There he became one of the most prominent authors in both prose and verse, the status that was strengthened even more after receiving a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1907, which made him the first English-writing laureate of the prize.

Kipling is considered to be an imperial author with a positive view on British rule in India. Though he is often accused to be the voice of imperialism, many of his stories and poems appear as a genuine belief that the introduction of western ideas could bring improvement to the underdeveloped Indian nation. One of the most notable works depicting the British effort to modernize the Indian subcontinent is a poem called "The White Man's Burden," published in 1899. In it, Kipling praises the self-sacrifice of the colonising power, which sent its best people to exile in the colonies, in order to serve the native people, as it is depicted in the first stanza:

- (1) Take up the White Man's burden--  
Send forth the best ye breed--  
Go bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives' need;  
To wait in heavy harness,  
On fluttered folk and wild--  
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,  
Half-devil and half-child.

In the following verses, Kipling even complains about the native peoples of the Indian subcontinent, who refuse to accept the offered improvement of their lives and who would rather stay uncivilised:

- (3) Take up the White Man's burden--  
The savage wars of peace --  
Fill full the mouth of Famine  
And bid the sickness cease;  
And when your goal is nearest  
The end for others sought,  
Watch sloth and heathen Folly  
Bring all your hopes to nought.
- (5) Take up the White Man's burden--  
And reap his old reward:  
The blame of those ye better,  
The hate of those ye guard --  
The cry of hosts ye humour  
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light: --  
"Why brought he us from bondage,  
Our loved Egyptian night?"

While Kipling considers British imperialism as a positive process, Smith looks at it from the opposite perspective as she is able to judge the effects of British rule in its colonies from the position of a contemporary observer. In *White Teeth*, Smith writes from the objective standpoint of a person who knows about British cultural, economic and political influence on its colonies, the outcomes of which are still visible in the countries even after decolonisation. Her characters, especially the immigrants of the first generation, grew up in British colonies where they were often made to accept the orders and directions of the ruling minority. Their traditional values and customs were impaired and they were led to adaptation of the British lifestyle

against their will. In the novel, Zadie Smith points to the British national history and its impact on citizens of the colonies and later immigrants to the mother country, i.e. England.

In order to illustrate the way the British rule influenced the lives of the people in colonies, in chapter 5 (named “The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal”) Smith portrays an event that led to Samad and Archie’s first meeting and developed into their life-long friendship. As a citizen of one of British colonies – Bangladesh, Samad had to fight in the Second World War as part of the British army. However, Samad should not have considered it as an order, but rather a privilege, as Smith implies using the voice of an English colonizer: “Samad Miah Iqbal, Samad, we are going to confer on you a great honour. You will fight in mainland Europe – not starve and drink your own piss in Egypt or Malaysia, no – you will fight the Hun where you find him” (Smith 2001, 88). But instead of gaining a better life, Samad’s future was spoilt for life, because he was shot in his right wrist shortly after joining the battles, leaving his right arm paralysed and not able “to defend a country that wasn’t his” (Smith 2001, 95) properly. Arikan (2013) says that “by this flashback to the war years, Smith both tells a personal history of Samad and Archie and she introduces the problem of colonization which is a racial and national history” (1683).

Samad’s presence in the British army during the Second World War implies that one of the principles of a functioning Empire was to acknowledge that the efforts of the British colonizers to raise the underdeveloped nations up should be paid back with the nations helping their mother country in its needs and interests. Apart from suggesting this fact, Smith also provides another important link to the colonial past of the Indian subcontinent, when she mentions Mangal Pande, a great-grandfather of the fictional Samad Iqbal. Mangal Pande (or Pandey) is a real historical figure. According to sources, Pande was a sepoy (an Indian soldier serving under British command in India) who rebelled against the British rule and attacked British officials in March 1857, which is considered to be the launch of the greatest uprising in India known as the Indian Mutiny of 1857 – an event brutally suppressed by the British. In the aftermath of this uprising, the British considered Pande a traitor, but in India, he is remembered as a fighter for freedom.

The two opposing views on the presence of Mangal Pande in the history of the Indian nation are present even in *White Teeth*. While on the one hand, Samad stands firmly and proudly by the actions of his predecessor, calling him “the great hero of the Indian Mutiny” (Smith 2001, 87), Archie often teases him about the way the British colonizers viewed Pande’s rebellion. Smith provides us with a note on the events leading to the Mutiny, as written by a British contemporary historian named Fitchett—a version that “was enough to send Samad into spasms of fury” (2001, 255): Pande, who was

half drunk with bhang, and wholly drunk with religious fanaticism, . . . shot at his lieutenant and missed him. Then he took out a large sword, a tulwar, and cowardly lunged while his lieutenant’s back was turned, catching him on the shoulder. A sepoy tried to restrain him, but Pande battled on. Then came reinforcements: one Captain Hearsay rushed forward, his son at his side, both armed and honourable and prepared to die for their country. . . . At which point Pande saw the game was up, pointed his enormous gun at his own head and dramatically pulled the trigger with his left foot. He missed. A few days later, Pande stood trial and was found guilty. . . . [H]is execution was ordered by one General Henry Havelock . . . who added . . . that he did hope that this would put an end to all the rash talk of mutiny one kept hearing recently. But it was too late.

(Smith 2001, 254-5)

For Samad, such a negative view on the heroism of Mangal Pande was simply unacceptable because it harmed the glorious name of his great-grandfather as well as the reputation of the Iqbal family. In this sense, a version that Samad and his nephew find in a library sheds a totally different light on his ancestor. In a book written by someone named Misra, Samad—to his immense joy—reads the following:

Mangal Pande fired the first bullet of the 1857 movement. His self-sacrifice gave the siren to the nation to take up arms against an alien ruler, culminating in a mass-uprising with no parallel in world history. Though the effort failed in its immediate consequences, it succeeded in laying the foundations of the Independence to be won in 1947. For his patriotism he paid with his life. But until his last breath he refused

to disclose the names of those who were preparing for, and instigating, the great uprising. (Smith 2001, 259)

After reading those lines, Samad feels a huge relief, because the “truth” about his great-grandfather has been found, and a pride that he is of Pande’s blood. Here it is important to add that Smith never mentions which version of Pande’s story is true and thus she lets the readers decide upon the one they want to consider true.

Even though Archie keeps provoking Samad with his constant pointing at Pande’s madness and drunkenness, Samad believes that these remarks are not worth any amount of significance. For him, the existence of Pande in a racial or national history gives him support and basis in the creation of his own personal history as well as the familial history that would be passed down to his sons, for he believes that knowing about the history of the Indian nation is a determining aspect of his sons’ healthy attitude towards the country in which they were born and raised, i.e. England. However, his success in this matter remains questionable.

Smith makes it clear that Samad is obsessed with his Bengali roots, Muslim faith and the legacy of Mangal Pande. He even criticises his wife Alsana for forgetting where she came from. He blames her for becoming English and losing her connection with their homeland back in Bangladesh, saying: “You say you are thankful we are in England, that’s because you have swallowed it whole” (Smith 2001, 199). However, Samad acts like a hypocrite, because even he cannot resist the temptations the western lifestyle throws his way, exchanging one vice for another or indulging in many at the same time. He foolishly cheats on Alsana with his sons’ attractive music teacher Poppy Burt-Jones. She even arouses Samad’s habit of frequent masturbation, which he in fear of Allah’s endless fury swaps for drinking. He therefore deceives not only Alsana, but also his moral principles. That is why he feels corrupted and blames neither himself nor his natural human weakness for the vices he commits, but rather the British culture, which corrupts him, his sons and his entire family. At one point, talking with Archie, Samad bursts with accusations against England for the moral decay affecting people around him:

Well, take Alsana's sisters – all their children are nothing but trouble. They won't go to mosque, they don't pray, they speak strangely, they dress strangely, they eat all kinds of rubbish, they have intercourse with God knows who. No respect for tradition. People call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption! . . . I am corrupt, my sons are becoming corrupt, we are all soon to burn in the fires of hell. (Smith 2001, 190-2)

Apart from the Indian history connected with the existence of Mangal Pande, Zadie Smith enriches the historical line in her novel with the rule of the British in the Caribbean, especially in Jamaica. This line is generally considered as closer to the author, because Smith herself comes from a blended family and bears a Caribbean origin. Her mother is Jamaican and her father is English. The origin of her parents is therefore transferred to the marriage of her two characters in *White Teeth*: Archie Jones is an Englishman and his wife Clara Jones (née Bowden) is Jamaican. In chapter 13, named "The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden," Smith takes her reader back to the Jamaican colony and introduces the story of Ambrosia Bowden, Clara's grandmother, and Hortense Bowden, Clara's mother. The author's aim is to imply that the colonial efforts of the British were often too harsh and even destructing for the people under their strict rule. According to the story, Ambrosia Bowden, a Jamaican girl, had an affair with a British official serving in Jamaica named Captain Charlie Durham, who impregnated her and soon left the country for a business. We learn that this affair is considered to be "an unforgotten trace of bad blood in the Bowdens" (Smith 2001, 356). Smith once again points out to the colonizer's attempts to "educate" and improve the life of the "primitive" people, which often led not to a better life, but rather to its opposite. Captain Durham "was not satisfied with simply taking her [Ambrosia's] maidenhood. He had to teach her something as well" (Smith 2001, 356). Later on, when Ambrosia was still 5-months pregnant, he left and made sure that Ambrosia's British education would continue under the direction of his friend Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, who was "like Durham, of the opinion that the natives required instruction, Christian faith and moral guidance" (Smith 2001, 258). Glenard took her to the church where he started touching her in an inappropriate manner and, suddenly, the earthquake hit the region and damaged

the church. One of the falling pillars killed Glenard at the same time Ambrosia gave birth to her daughter Hortense.

In the novel, Durham and Glenard represent the British officials in the Caribbean during colonialism and their efforts to plant the seeds of British identity into the natives. They tried to make them think, act and live like the British. Moreover, they gave them promises of a better life in the mother country. What we learn in the novel about Glenard gives us a clearer vision of how the Jamaicans were tricked to move to England only to face hard labour and death of hunger and poverty:

[A]fter hastily promising them streets of gold, Sir Edmund shipped three hundred Jamaicans to North London. . . . For a while, things went reasonably well. The Jamaicans were optimistic about England. They put the freezing climate to the back of their minds and were inwardly warmed by Sir Edmund's sudden enthusiasm and interest in their welfare. But Sir Edmund had always had difficulties retaining enthusiasm and interest. . . . For the next fifteen years . . . the Glenard Oak factory heard nothing of him. . . . [T]he business went under, the missionary group discreetly disappeared, . . . the Jamaicans, unable to get work elsewhere, . . . died of . . . hunger, some were jailed for the petty crimes hunger prompts, many crept awkwardly into the East End and the English working class. (Smith 2001, 306-7)

We have already mentioned that while the national history is mainly reflected in the first generation of immigrants in Smith's *White Teeth*, the personal history is typical for the children of these immigrants—i.e. the second generation that was already born in England. Their task—as expected by their immigrant parents—is to learn about the history of their original homelands, but this task is incredibly difficult to complete since these children do not have any connection with the countries of their parents' birth, and therefore they are rootless. Having a knowledge about the history of one's nation is important in order to build a healthy identity, i.e. to know who one is and where one belongs. According to Schlesinger, "history is to the nation rather as memory is to the individual and an individual deprived of memory becomes disoriented and lost, not knowing where he has been or where he is going" (quoted in Arian 1687-8). In *White Teeth*, it is obvious that the three central repre-

sentatives of the second generation – Samad’s twin sons Magid and Millat and Archie’s only daughter Irie – have no historical consciousness of neither the national nor their familiar histories. Their parents have never told them properly what nation they come from or what important events are connected with their ancestors. This lack of knowledge means that they have to learn who they are or who they should be the hard way, which means that the paths they choose to do so are often too distant from the ones desired by their parents.

At first, let us make a few remarks on Samad’s two sons Magid and Millat. Neither of them has a connection with their family’s Bengali roots. However, because they were born in London and they grew up surrounded with the English way of life, the western influence on them is apparent since their early childhood. Millat wears brand clothes and Magid dresses like a typical English conservative intellectual. Moreover, Magid stops calling Alsana “Amma” and uses the English “Mum” instead, which brings his mother “close to tears” (Smith 2001, 151). He even dares to change his name to a rather ordinary English one only to be closer to the English at least by name – as his skin is obviously different – which infuriates Samad even more: “I GIVE YOU A GLORIOUS NAME LIKE MAGID MAHFOOZ MURSHED MUBTASIM IQBAL! . . . AND YOU WANT TO BE CALLED MARK SMITH!” (Smith 2001, 151).

What Samad sees as corruption, Arikan (2013) calls degeneration. She says that “the problems resulted from the lack of knowledge about racial-familial history of these characters coordinate with ‘the degeneration of the original culture in multi-racial or immigrant families’” (1691). In the novel, Samad – a proud follower of the Bengaliness – wants his sons to follow his steps. However, he acknowledges that he has not educated them enough and therefore he plays a part in their straying identities. While from the outside, the behaviour of Magid and Millat can be viewed as assimilation, from the perspective of Samad it is rather corruption – a process which is highly undesirable as it leads his sons away from their Bengali roots. For Samad – as probably for many immigrant parents – there is only one solution to save their broken souls. He has to send them back to Bangladesh to bring them back to their roots because, for Samad, “roots were what saved, the ropes one throws out to rescue drowning men, to Save Their Souls. [He wanted]

to create for his boys roots on shore, deep roots that no storm or gale could displace" (Smith 2001, 193).

Because Samad has money only for one of his sons, he decides to send Magid to Bangladesh hoping that being surrounded by Bengali culture will return him to the roots and destroy the corruption England has already planted in him. This may seem ironic since Magid has never been to Bangladesh before. He was born in England and therefore he considers England his home. And what is ironic even more, back in Bangladesh, in the centre of Bengaliness, Magid's Englishness fully develops and after several years he returns back "more English than the English" (Smith 2001, 406). What is the cause of such a result? The answer is obvious: Samad forgot that once the roots are damaged, there is no way of repairing them because, speaking in a dental terminology, "the first sign of loose teeth is something rotten, something degenerate, deep within the gums" (Smith 2001, 193). Magid's Englishness was already in him when he came to Bangladesh and there it developed because Bangladesh still bears a lot of cultural traces of the times when it was under British colonial rule, which is yet another thing Samad did not think of.

Millat's growing up has to face more problems than Magid's. While Magid has always known where he belongs and ends up fully embracing the Englishness in him, Millat struggles in his process of identity formation. Though he tries to act as an Englishman, his mind cannot get over the fact that people look at him as a foreigner due to his exotic appearance:

He knew that he . . . was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; . . . that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a filmmaker; that he should go back to his own country; . . . that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country. (Smith 2001, 233-4).

Because he perceives these burden-like opinions of the English on immigrants, and because he wants to belong somewhere, Millat turns into a devoted member of KEVIN, which is

a fundamentalist group dedicated to violent protection of Islam (the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation).

Looking at it from another perspective, Millat—even if in an extreme way—follows the path of his ancestor Mangal Pande and sticks to his Bengali roots by fighting against the western culture. Millat becomes one of the group's best spokespeople, but the fact is that he is more interested in being a gangster than being a Muslim. Because he feels as an outsider in the country of his birth, he decides to declare war against England and its Englishness. Overall, both Magid and Millat appear in extreme positions and betray the concept of a Bengali identity that their father desired to seed in them. As Smith shows here, solving the problems of one's connection with his original homeland or identity is practically unsolvable within the second generation of immigrants, since their links to their national or familial histories are broken or even destroyed.

Out of the second-generation immigrants, there is only Irie Jones, the daughter of Samad's friend Archie, who demonstrates a genuine interest in knowing her roots. Such a desire is remarkable even more if we realise that Irie has a more complicated origin than the Iqbal brothers. Unlike Magid or Millat, whose parents are both of Bengali origin, Irie's blood is a mixture of two origins—her father is English and her mother is Jamaican—which makes her an example of a so-called cultural hybridisation. That is why her strife to find her own identity is much more demanding and complex as she is positioned between two opposite poles. Moreover, she does not have her parents' support or direction as they never speak with her about her ancestors or Jamaican origin. Irie becomes more and more frustrated because she acknowledges the lack of familial history. She wants to know the truth about where she comes from, but her parents do not act at all: "These parents were full of information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear. But she didn't want it any more, she was tired of it. She was sick of never getting the whole truth. She was returning to sender" (Smith 2001, 379).

The sender, Irie's Jamaican grandmother Hortense, initiates Irie into the mysteries of "Bowdenism," which helps her find her identity. She embraces her origin and when asked to join Hortense on a trip to Jamaica in 2000, Irie is overjoyed to go because she wants to explore her roots to the depth,

[f]or Jamaica appeared to Irie as if it were newly made. Like Columbus himself, just by discovering it she had brought it into existence; . . . a place where things simply were. No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs; . . . it sounded like a beginning. . . . Like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page. (Smith 2001, 402)

Because Irie is split between two different origins, she is also split in terms of race and culture. That is the reason why she attempts to find the way out of this situation. In the section named “Irie 1990, 1907,” Smith concentrates on the development of Irie’s character from her initial rebellion (she wants to be just like the English and does anything to hide her Caribbean appearance) until her final return to Jamaican roots and their acknowledgement. We observe how Irie’s roots always return to her mother Clara, grandmother Hortense and great-grandmother Ambrosia. The proportion of Jamaican blood is in Irie’s case stronger than the proportion of English blood she inherited from her father Archie, and even though she strives to be English, she finally ends up successfully embracing her “exotic” heritage.

In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith operates a lot with the concept of “history” and “root.” She manifests that having a knowledge about one’s origin and roots is important in the process of identity-formation of people in general and multi-ethnic or multi-cultural families in particular. Therefore, the lack of one’s historical awareness – as depicted via Irie and the Iqbal twins – has a negative impact on their appreciation of who they are and who they should be. In the novel, Smith presents two ways how parents deal with their children’s identity struggle. Samad considers turning to roots as a tool that should get his sons out of their confusion. However, he fails to realise that such an effort is worthless once the children are too “Englishified,” i.e. once they have adopted the English lifestyle. Samad does not educate his sons about the history of Bangladesh, they know nothing about British colonialism in the East Indies or their famous predecessor Mangal Pande. The other way is letting the children find about their history on their own. Irie is left alone in her process of self-realisation. Though she knows about her Jamaican origin, she lacks the knowledge about her Jamaican ancestors and, in her strong desire to know the truth, she turns

to her Jamaican grandmother for help. This way Smith proves that historical consciousness has an important and irreplaceable function in a person's appreciation of his present state of being as well as his future.

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**ABSTRACT**

The paper is exploring the interconnection of Smith's opening line and the way her immigrant characters from Bangladesh and Jamaica deal with the history of their former home countries as well as their personal histories. It aims to analyse the way Smith points out – through the Iqbal and the Jones family – the history of Great Britain, mainly its colonial era and the effects of subsequent decolonisation on the East Indies and the Caribbean.

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