

Fundamentally Human: Sex and Character Development in White Teeth

Analise Smith-Hinkley

"Pulchritude. From the Latin, *pulcher*, beautiful.

Pulchritude- beauty where you would least suspect it..." (263-64).

You must remember this, a kiss is still a kiss,

A sigh is just a sigh;

The fundamental things apply,

As time goes by."

- Herman Hupfeld, "As Time Goes By, 1931 (341).

Zadie Smith's White Teeth presents a dizzying number of characters and plot lines, interweaving stories, persons, and eras into continually surprising patterns; the sheer scope of material presented renders any all-encompassing interpretation of the novel entirely impossible. What does however establish itself with remarkable clarity, is the rawness that reveals itself in inter-character relations. We are faced with the task of continually trying to determine the nature of various "involvements"—the sort of suburban facade of perfection that accompanies Chalfenism or the inextricably bound Magid and Millat destined forever to spar against one another, even Samad's perpetual redefinition of his religion to account for extra-marital affairs and masturbation. Though it would be futile to try select exclusively any one relationship as the most poignant, certainly one of the more complex and stirring moments of the novel finds Irie in the position of mediator between Magid and Millat, intending to simply arrange their reunion, but in the process, having sex with first Millat, followed approximately 25 minutes later with Magid. The nature of this "involvement" as it were, epitomizes the very soul of White Teeth: in a novel that puts such an enormous amount of weight in a multitude of relationships, I find it useful not to decide what mold each relationship fits into respectively, but rather what extraordinary curiousness in each makes them so fundamentally human.

"As for Millat, it had been a very long time since anybody had touched him or he had touched anybody. Add to that the touch of memory, the touch of ten years of love unreturned, the touch of a long, long history—the result was inevitable" (381). While the idea of unrequited love and nostalgic history suggests a kind of ideal romantic prelude, the chain of events that sends Irie and Millat tumbling into each other's bodies is hardly

that. As is the nature of the novel, the butterfly effect is always cropping up everywhere—this hot mess hardly an exception. What begins as a potentially harmless gesture—"Almost without meaning to, she touched his chest" (380)—spirals in a matter of seconds into that "inevitable" result that is sex. Aside from the sort of annoyingly contrived note that they are copulating on a prayer mat, there are still a great few issues that make what we were as readers secretly always assuming would happen (sexual tension between old family friends in novels usually only has one outcome) into something perverse and sad. Perverse not because they are "making love" (hardly the appropriate term, though it is the one used) on a prayer mat, cheap not because it was so unmeditated, but simply tragic because it is not a mental or physical release, it is a half-hearted, full-bodied attempt at self-fulfillment. What starts off in a desperate frenzy ends when they release each other in "horror," Irie huddles "embarrassed and ashamed because she could see how much he regretted it" (381) and Millat prays fervently afraid of the "great camera in the sky" (381) frowning upon his actions.

If there is anything to be said for the upsides of regrettable sex in this case, it is the almost instantaneous mess of thoughts on the fucked up nature of love in the "modern world" into which Irie/Smith launches:

What was it about this unlovable century that convinced us we were, despite everything, eminently lovable as a people, as a species? What made us think that anyone who fails to love us is damaged, lacking, malfunctioning in some way? (381)

Firstly, it would be silly to fall into the trap of assuming that these ravings are universal, that they hold some irrefutable, profound truth hidden amidst this shamed regret, because to do so would be to undermine the diversity within the novel, it would cheapen the nature of other, different relationships. What is striking about the straight bitterness and

pessimism of this resenting emotional philosophy is that it embodies perfectly what makes the whole ordeal unique; by way of free indirect discourse, Irie has slipped into the position of narrator, a position of power that in effect makes her words project themselves onto every relationship we as readers have seen thus far. We run with her thoughts, thinking, yes, yes Irie, it's true, "Not everybody deserves love all the time" (382).

A tempting ideology to embrace given the zeal with which Irie supports it, but it is only a matter of moments before the real motivation for this otherwise profound philosophizing is betrayed by Irie's determination to "make Magid the second son for once" (382) in order to revenge him for effecting Millat's feelings of inadequacy, and in turn his inability to love her. Sex with Magid proves to be equally defeating, if not more so, ending regrettably in an echo of the religious repentance Millat demonstrated: "Then he gave her a kiss on the forehead that felt like a baptism and she wept like a baby" (382).

The two bizarre sexual encounters end as quickly as they started, but they leave behind a fairly serious feeling of evolution, there is something we have learned from them; it feels that despite any perversity and sadness and rapidity, they were significant in a way that transcends the transience of the actions themselves. The resolve with which Irie takes Magid is animalistic to the point that it feels like, given our knowledge of Millat as the violently beautiful one, we should be reading about Irie and Millat. This forceful ravaging of placid Magid effectively blurs the rift between the brothers as beings, in that sex with Millat is a spontaneous lust for the tangible whereas Magid is a malicious and desperate revenge fuck: Millat and Magid are in these moments a combination of all their traits in some mixed up and distorted blend—both are pious and

desperate for contact, violent and beautiful. As Irie says retrospectively, "Magid and Millat. Millat and Magid. Majlat. Milljid" (437).

So what does it mean, this strange spiritual (for lack of a better, less Hallmark-y word) union amidst desperate sex between Irie and Magid and Millat, respectively? This strange unmediated expression of rawness that manifests itself in a distortion of what is conventionally considered beautiful (because certainly, the entire situation is really an indescribably awkward thing under any circumstance)? It is the very core of White Teeth, it is one more devastatingly intimate personal experience in the world of characters we experience as readers. It is two characters, twins yes, but two that are staged as enemies, opposite in every trait, given commonality through human fault and human need in another being, a girl doomed inherently to the same faults and needs. This "involvement" between Irie and Millat and Magid is unlike any other relation explicitly described in White Teeth. And the other relationships in the novel are equally unique, obnoxious, or pleasant in their own right. The unlikely beauty in the curious nature of all these relationships however, is what makes them all undeniably human, and the novel unexpectedly—at least in this specific aspect—extraordinary.