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GENETIC ENGINEERING, HYBRID FUTURE: READING ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH*

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ABSTRACT

The novel *White Teeth* is hailed as a representative of British society's various 'multi' dimensions as multicultural, multiethnic, multi-racial and religious boundaries all blurred into hybrid framework; the diversified culture in postmodern world is a mélange of two or more disparate cultural, social, religious and racial identities making a "third space."<sup>1</sup> The emergence of all these phenomena is caused by postmodern viability to represent the system of an 'inflation of discourses'<sup>2</sup> across all genres. We confront the contemporary writers to be feasible in their works with science fiction, pulp fiction, and cyberpunks evolving possible worlds exponentially reducing the dichotomies of high and popular literature submerging into one. The mainstream literature has been consolably cajoled to immerse the subcategory of aforesaid genres in it. This inclusiveness is lauded in the works of Pynchon, Wallace, Rushdie and many more across the world and one of them is Smith who accommodates science fiction in her fiction and makes her readers conscious about the rapid technological progress and movements which are reality of our quotidian lives. The covert storyline of the novel is beside the main plot of searching the self of second generation and conflicting their hybrid identities goes simultaneously with the characters deeply unpredictable and schizophrenic lives where they knowingly or unknowingly confront with a transgenic creature, Future Mouse©, a nucleus that triggers to think essentiality of past, their rootedness and rootlessness history.

I read here the novel as a critique of scientific determinism over chance, randomness and selection for hybridized multicultural identity.

**Key Words:** hybridity, identity, multiculturalism, science fiction, pulp fiction and postmodernism.

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We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrid of machine and organism. Donna Haraway.  
"A Cyborg Manifesto" (1991)

The statement here is relevant enough in the context of racial genealogy and immigrant's search in the host nation where historical veracity is in conflict with new identity in multicultural society. They are 'stuck between a rock and a hard place' (Smith 351), the colonial affliction or machine [ry] of colonial history made a pact to

organism that converges into a new consciousness and identity. The idea of history is said to have various roles and consequences such as particular emphasis on race and gender in any narratives of colonization that can be seen in the novel, Hortense Bowden and her mother Ambrosia Bowden when the first Bowden is 'taught' by Captain Durham 'a little education' of English manners and etiquettes to an Afro; Glenard was appointed tutor in absence of Durham and he also tried to 'teach' Ambrosia, rather putting the colonial roots to modify her genes. This story occurred in 1907 and now in presents her great- grand daughter Irie Jones half-Jamaican half-English commences her journey of searching her roots after initial failure of resorting her genes or genetic disposition in fretful way in 1992.

The novel is about three families' saga Joneses/Bowden, Iqbals (Bangladeshi), and Chalfens; the key aspect of the novel is the clash of first and second generation, accommodation to and assimilation into the host culture. The structure of the novel is not linear and it jumps into history from present and ends with the snapshots of possible future. It glances over the Rushdie Affair (1989), the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), Kingston Earthquake; the lives of the characters do not follow linearity and they move from the past to present and future that Smith categorizes in dates: Archie 1974, 1945; Samad 1984, 1857; Irie 1990, 1907; Magid, Millat and Marcus 1992, 1998. The linear pattern of time is juxtaposed by rhizomatic network of connection. Samad and Archie have mutual friendship since the Second World War, their wives Alsana and Clara respectively, are much younger to them, their children Irie, Magid and Millat are in a same school and they come into contact by accident to Chalfen family. They all have roots distant to the country they are living and this identity crisis makes their lives in a constant tussle to the other which they have to adopt. Paproth argues Smith's characters as, "Her characters seek answers, seek meanings, but find themselves caught between various binaries: the religious and secular (Millat), Eastern and Western values (Samad), the past and the present (Irie), internal and external history (Archie), randomness and predestination (Marcus)" (1).

The in-between position is commensurate with the idea of genetic determinism of Future Mouse<sup>®</sup> that is scientifically developed to study cancer by Marcus, a geneticist, in his laboratory and he is going to display it at the New Year's Eve in 1992. I want to mention that such organisms are not new to laboratories. One such is OncoMouse<sup>™</sup> that is patented by DuPont to research the cancer study. To introduce the creature in the novel most likely to see the possibility of engineered life, no past and roots to concern, biologically and culturally stagnant, the mouse "holds out the tantalizing promise of a new phase in human history where we are not victims of the random but instead directors and arbiters of our own fate" (433).

The mouse unambiguously is juxtaposed to the lives of the characters that are either searching their roots in history or want to run away from the clutches of the past. Samad, a waiter after serving in the Second World War, has obsession with his great grand –father Mangal Pande's history which he seems himself to possess by genetic inheritance thinks English culture and hybridity a kind of 'corruption' and to save the religious fervor and traditions in his sons he tries to challenge the fate and 'plans' to send his son Magid to Bangladesh because of his terrible fear of assimilation. But the experiment failed to determine the genes. The tragicomic scene carved out by Smith criticizes the predictability of life when Magid returns as 'more English than English' in Britain and becomes a part of Marcus's FutureMouse<sup>®</sup> project "whose very bodies did exactly what Marcus told them" and to be displayed on the Millennial Science Commission. And his second son Millat, living in Britain at all odds becomes a recalcitrant fanatic and a member of fanatic group KEVIN, and participates in the burning of 'that dirty book' at Bradford instantly reminds us of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*.

Smith in her tragicomic mode presents hybridity not as a critique of biological purity but a defend of the assimilation of cultural, racial, religious and social attributes to make a new identity as Laura Moss says, "...hybridity is the joining of two entities to create a third entity. Such hybridity in cultural terms is neither an appropriation of one culture by another, nor the acculturation of one and another. Instead it is the third element produced by the interaction of cultures, communities or individuals." (12)

This 'third element' is accorded in the character Irie curiously zany for readers and her inordinate prompt for identity is a humorous retreat to look back into the mirror. Earlier agonized to see herself failed according to the norms of White culture, England to her was, "a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a strange land (222).The mirror that forces her to believe "in her ugliness, in her wrongness had

subdued her...[s]he [is] all wrong ( 181, emphasis is original). Like Smith, she is also half-Jamaican, half-English daughter of Archie and Clara. Her hybrid identity to her is more concerted for her body in utter desperation that she at the very early age starts discerning her cultural and racial legacy after derailing to change fervently her biological disposition through cultural engineering "Irie believed she had been dealt the dodgy cards: mountainous curves, buck teeth and thick metal retainer, impossible Afro hair"(65). Her consciousness about figure makes her worried because she bears racial comments regarding her shape, "big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teethes" (221); already failing her father having no blue eyes. Her fumbled ways of articulating to the British culture was a failed experiment to 'reinvent herself' (334). She goes under a hair treatment quixotically to change her Afro curled hair into straight like English girls "straight, straight long black sleek flick able tossable touchable finger- throuable wind- blowable hair. With bangs" (273), but unfortunately the attempt goes in vain with disaster that due to ammonia her hair falls out and she has to put a wig on. Irie wants to attract Millat but her too much pressure on her physical appearance could not make her realized that Millat is also like her living in same crisis to invent himself according the norms of White culture, whose "identity is fashioned by Hollywood, and specifically by the gangster movie" (Head 112).

Irie, then parts her ways with her family after discovering her mother, Clara's false white teeth, a metaphorical incident to imply Clara's false identity and uprootedness from her past and history. Irie makes her own way to search her roots at her grand-mother Hortense Bowden committed to Jehovah's Witness, married to an African to "drag her genes back from the brink", in Jamaica where Irie tries to discover her inheritance and finds the place a refuge from the wrongness she possesses by her genes But Irie learns nothing from her except nuances of the story of her great grand-mother Ambrosia and "blankness of the past" (402). Hortense is always critical of British imperialistic attitude by saying, "somebody always tryin' to heducate", but she is also not seized by history and past, "da past is done wid. Nobody learn nuttin' from it" (193). At the end of the novel we see Irie more mature, with a positive attitude she learns how to accept the reality that not predestination or determinism but chance and randomness make a life. But before this comprehension she undergoes with various events which are directly or indirectly related to her, e.g., her acquaintance with Chalfen family, the fissures she detects in their perfect balanced lives, her relation to Future Mouse®, and its escape and the most important her fatherless child's identity because she herself does not know either Millat or Magid is the father. She unlike Millat and Magid accepts practicality of deeply unpredictable life and becomes Marcus's secretary and wants to study dentistry.

Smith's main concern of the novel is to deal with hybridity that is binary opposed with sameness and biological purity. The introduction of Chalfens provided a sufficient ground, unlike Irie, Magid and Millat they are 'clones of each other' (314), although they are from Poland and have Jewish ancestry. Dawson argues the connection of Chalfens with Irie, Magid and Millat that these children "incarnate titillating forms of cultural, racial, and class difference that inject spice to their otherwise predictable lives" (2007, 166). Joyce Chalfen, wife of Marcus, a horticulturist introduces her husband as a genius who "always with humanity in mind", can generate mice for doing things what Marcus wants. Joyce herself a horticulturist prefers cross-pollination of plants that are more adaptable and survive easier. She has authored a book *The New Flower Power* where she has written, "...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.( 309) . But her husband Marcus seems exact contrary to the notion of Joyce's cross-pollination, whom the development of Future Mouse® is a kind of scientific racism, a world of science and programming to be "arbitrators of our own fate" and analyzing the stature of Future Mouse® he says, [Y]ou eliminate the random, you rule the world" (341). The entire life span of it has been carved out and its genetic programming is eventually an unambiguous feature of science to "eliminate genetic defect" (433). At one place when Marcus is waiting for Magid, he astonishingly caught sight of an Indian girl reading a book he has written an article on genetic engineering, Marcus asks her comments and she replies rather surprisingly and curtly, " eliminate 'undesirable 'qualities' in people" and further adds " there's just something a little fascist about the whole deal" ( 418). She is also more critical about the project of Future Mouse®, "Millions of blondes with blue eyes? Mail order babies?" (419).

The exhibition of the mouse is said to be displayed at Perret institute in London is another unintentional FutureMouse© complicit to enhance the idea of scientific racism. The institute belongs to the same Perret who was destined to be killed by Archie in the war because of being a Nazi eugenic. He is introduced by Marcus as a “grand old Frenchman, a gentleman and a scholar” (337). The relation of eugenics and genetic coding are somehow boosting the idea of scientific racism in a new way of colonialism, selecting and eliminating random. The cachet of this project rigorously focuses, as Dawson argues, “[t]he prominence of eugenic thought before the Second World War was intimately related to the imperial ambitions of the European nations in which raciological science was conducted” (156). Dr. Perret who is described apparently an opponent to hybridity, trying to control and mould lives, “a race of men, and a race of indestructible men that will survive the last days of this earth” (119).

The presentation of Future Mouse© at Millennial Science Commission eventually becomes a turning point in everyone’s life, that aims to dictate future without roots, without any cultural, racial, religious traits, no border of time but, “One mouse only... because its future was equal to its present which was equal to its past. [...] Just certainty in its purest form” (490). Magid helps in the project of genetic engineering and resolute to defend it despite the fact that his twin brother Millat, a member of KEVIN has decided to kill him, which Smith deploys somewhat archly as the millennial symbol of Western culture \_ locates him within a four square secular Englishman. (Head 112)

Almost every character gathers to this exhibition intently to his/her purpose, Hortense due to her religious ground, FATE, an animalist group to show their condemnation, and Joneses and Iqbals because of their disliking though they initially unwilling to go. Millat only “[t]o turn that history around” (506) related to his great grand-father Mangal Pande. The scene is deployed as unintended ironic consequences. When Dr. Perret comes into the stage Samad recognizes him instantaneously that he was spared by Archie in the war, Millat with his gun pointed to the doctor aiming to shoot him but suddenly Archie comes in and places himself between the trajectory of Millat’s gun and saves Perret again [W]ith no more reason or rhyme than the first time” (533), consequently falling down on the box of FutureMouse© and it is escaped from the hall.

The escaping of FutureMouse © is relevantly questions the fear of hybridity and randomness. The saving of Dr. Perret by Archie is an example of chance over predetermination because Archie is inclined to prefer choices by tossing a coin. Irie’s child is also offered by the irrelevancy of constructed heritage, while listening to the lecture she thinks about her child that there are so many things that cannot be detected by human eye (527). The baby is the symbol of hybrid logic of having Caribbean, English and Bangladeshi roots and nurtured in Jewish heritage (Joshua). McMann says that Irie’s yet born child challenges both biology and science (633). The trajectories of Archie’s undecidability, Irie’s child, and liberation of FutureMouse© are accrued with the impossibilities to make future perfect.

The novel ends with snapshots of future Irie, Joshua, her child and Hortense are “sitting by the Caribbean sea”, Irie’s daughter writing “affectionate postcards to Bad Uncle Millat and Good uncle Magid” (448); Smith does not end her novel conventionally but to give her approbation to hybridity in the multicultural and multiethnic land in Britain, a suitable place for it disparate things she merges only to accept hybrid post colonials (Head 114).

“This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment...Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secret within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks.” (326) The contemporary fiction provides blurring and oscillating binary components; gives way to science fiction over traditional fiction that is relevant to hermeneutics of postmodern culture. As the science fiction ends with utopian and dystopian vision of future with man, machine and animal, Smith ends the novel with possible future or “possible worlds.” Human life is not subject to socially or genetically constructed by manipulation but process of social construction by chance and environment one gets to be nurtured in.

## Notes

1. The phrase 'Third Space' was used by Bhabha in an interview to Jonathan Rutherford saying, "importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge.(1990, 211)
2. Interpreting postmodernism the phrase 'inflation of discourse' Charles Newman said that postmodernism is only the representative system of discourses across all level of society.

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