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THE IMMIGRANTS' DILEMMA IN A CIVIC NATION: A STUDY OF THE PREDICAMENT
OF IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH* AND HANIF
KUREISHI'S *THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA*

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ABSTRACT

People have migrated from one place to another with different purposes. Some of them were prompted by longing for better living conditions while some by political or geographical reasons. Migration continues today too. The impact of the new environment on the migrants has been diverse. The arrival of a new community evoked diverse response from the native people too. The immigrants who moved away from their home environment could not create a space for themselves in the new nation they adopted. The second generation immigrants encountered a worse situation. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* presents the issues faced by first generation and second generation immigrants and some of their responses to those issues. This paper attempts to prove that though the second generation immigrants develop multiple roots, they fail to grow in the environment adopted by their parents. The first generation immigrants though alienated by their adopted country have memories of their homeland left long back, while the second generation is at a loss to have a land which is their home either in their memories or in reality.

Keywords: Identity, migration, alienation. roots

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We become not a melting pot, but a beautiful mosaic. Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different dreams. (Jimmy Carter, qtd.in *Bahman*5)

British racism, of course, is not our problem. It's yours. We simply suffer from the effects your problem. And until you, the whites see that the issue is not integration, or harmony, or multiculturalism, but simply facing up to and eradicating the prejudice from within almost all of you, the citizens of your new and last Empire will be obliged to struggle against you. (Salman Rushdie 130)

Migration is not a new phenomenon but something that helped the distribution of human species across the world. Geographical changes and corresponding climatic changes brought about changes in his/her physical features. Essentially he/she is a human being. But with social, cultural, political and scientific progress the process of migration becomes not just movement of people from one location to another but from one socio-cultural and political space to another.

This paper focuses on the predicament of immigrant communities from Afro-Asian and Caribbean communities in Britain and the impact of it in their private and public life as discussed in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Hanif Kuriishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*(BS). The analysis is based on the primordial and civic notions of nationalism. This paper also attempts to show that British multiculturalism has failed to transform British society into a "beautiful mosaic" as it could not address the fundamental issue of racism-the legacy of British imperialism- which ails the psyche of majority of whites.

The modern nation is defined in terms of the rights and duties of citizenship. The primordial notion of the nation is based on the dominant themes of common decent, territorial belonging and shared language in discourses of identity. According to Ernest Renan, a nation is a spiritual principle, a soul and of the two aspects of nation/ spiritual principle one is in the past and the other is in present. One is a common possession of rich legacy of memories; the other is actual consent, the desire to live together, the will to continue to value the heritage that has been received in common. The idea of shared memories though ignored in civic nation is not insubstantial. Connections to the past are crucial to the individual as well as to the nation. The two novels have proved this beyond doubt. Neither the immigrants nor the host (whites) can unburden themselves of the baggage of the past. Discourses of the past determine the way in which future dialogues are carried out.

Racial superiority is one of the key aspects of colonial discourse that has disturbed post colonial interaction between the whites and the immigrants from former Afro-Asian and Caribbean colonies. It is so deeply rooted in Britishness that neither the requirements nor the pressures of societal modernisation can uproot it completely. The immigrant also continues to be the *other* in Britain. If it is racial superiority that reigns in the collective unconsciousness of white Britain, it can be religion, race or ethnicity-the different aspects of primordial nationalism-that rules the immigrants' lives.

Britain did not shut its doors against the immigrants. But immigrants did feel, like many characters in the two novels- they were without face and voice. In the early nineteenth century Britain passed an Aliens Act which targeted Jewish immigrants fleeing from Russia and Eastern Europe. The prevalent notion was that they were unclean, criminal, and diseased. The same concerns reappeared when people from former colonies flocked to Britain in the post-colonial era. The idea of Britain was to assimilate them into British society by making them completely forget their culture and traditions. Neither were their languages taught in schools nor were they allowed to speak in them in the school premises. If the number of immigrant children in one school exceeded the permissible limit they were bused to another school (Squire 52). Every attempt was made, as in the colonial situations, to disgrace the culture of immigrant. They were made feel faceless so that the host community would look homogenous. This also helped Britain to continue the legacy of racial superiority so that they could retain their identity intact.

In *Buddha of Suburbia*, Haroon's life as an immigrant in Britain becomes an extension of his life as a colonised in India. As children Haroon and Anwar played cricket matches in India against British only to let the British win. Later in London, "The whites will never promote us, Dad said. Not an Indian while there is a British man left on Earth. You don't have to deal with them- they still think they have an Empire when they don't have two pennies to rub together."

Samad feels no different. He defines himself as "a Muslim and man and a son and a Believer." He fears that the alien culture with its lack of regard for people's religion would make him feel faceless just as his great grandfather, MangalPandey did. MangalPandey fired the first bullet of the Revolt of 1857 because, "Under the specious pretext of new weaponry, the English were intending to destroy their caste, their honour, their standing in the eyes of gods and men- everything, in short, that made life worth living." Samad's idea of nation is centred on the aspect of religion and it is religion that shapes his identity. It is of utmost importance

to him, "Let me tell you something Archibald. A man is a man is a man. His family threatened, his beliefs attacked, his way of life destroyed, his whole world coming to an end- he will kill." Samad's words voice the concern and fears of the immigrant population from the Afro-Asian and Caribbean communities. Citizenship can never be a monistic identity. It is never apart from nor does it transcend other identities- linguistic, religious, ethnic, racial etc. -that are important to citizens. The monistic notion of citizenship imposes a new order on the immigrant which is alien to him and which can diminish his standing in the world- "He won't let that new order role over him without struggle. There will be people he will kill."

The first generation immigrant loses country, language and culture and is forced to come to terms with another place, another way of thinking. It's an altogether different view of reality. Life becomes a constant struggle. Samad faces this when he meets Poppy. He at once falls for her though he has his religion constantly reminding of the dos and don'ts. He is at a moral crossroads, devoured by the intensity of physical, spiritual and sexual hunger. While he burns with desire for Poppy, he is concerned about his faith and what Allah forbids him from doing. He feels England has corrupted him, his wife and his children. There is rebellion within. He wishes to save his children from such a crisis- of being corrupted by Britain. He is concerned about the second generation growing up without any sense of tradition and sense of morality. "They won't go to mosque, they don't pray, they speak 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!" (BS 159) .Samad's conflict ends in the separation of the twins. Magid is sent to Bangladesh while Milliat remains in England.

Haroon is disturbed by the racial prejudice of the former coloniser. He leaves his wife for another woman though his religion is against it, but later regrets placing self before family. Anwar is adamant that his daughter should marry an Indian of his choice. Though the immigrant encounters different set of values, for the first generation values of his nation are closer to heart than the ones of his 'adopted' nation, which does not accept him. "Anwar and Dad appeared to be returning internally to India, or at least resisting the English here." What Haroon says about himself and Anwar is true for all first generation immigrants in its essence. "We old Indians come to like this England less and less and we return to an imaginary India."

Memories of a nation left long back along with the violence perpetuated by the host community alienates the immigrant who holds close the rich cultural ties and tradition in self-protection. Mo Hussein Ishmad embraces his religion and funds Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation (KEVIN) because Britain fails him as a citizen. He had been a victim of racist violence at the hands of racist Britain- knifed five times, lost the tip of his three fingers - it is one man against an army. When he complains he is rewarded by late night visit to his house and thorough kicking by five policemen. Violence and theft become part of existence. The culprits are all whites- from secondary school children, decrypt dentists, teenage thugs, and parents of teenage thugs to specific neo-nazists. This violence brings him securely within in the folds of his religion. When he first encounters KEVIN he feels that at least someone is speaking his language:

He wanted to take revenge, to give something in return for what he had received in the past eighteen years. He wanted the degenerate nature of these people explained to him. He wanted to know the history of it and the politics of it and the root cause...He wanted to see their art exposed and their science exposed and their tastes exposed and their distastes. But words would never be enough...He wanted to know why these people kept on beating the shit out of him. And then he wanted to go and beat the shit out of some of these people. (WT 392)

Hussein Ishmad has a fellow sufferer in Anwar. The family of Anwar lives a life pervaded by fear of violence." At night they (the racists) roamed the streets beating cans and shoving shit and burning rags through the letter boxes. Frequently the mean, white, hating faces had public meetings and the Union Jack was paraded through the streets protected by the police..Jeeta kept buckets of water around her bed in case the shop was fire bombed in the night." Symbolically the nation is at loggerheads with its immigrant citizens. The immigrants continue to stay outside the 'borders' of nation as the *other*, with the nation - the *self*- against them (Bhabha 149).

Living in the liminal space of cultural hybridity the second generation immigrants face a deeper conflict (Bill 130, 118). S/He lives in a multicultural society where heterogeneity is celebrated in political discourses but not in public discourses. They belong neither to their parent/s' nation nor are they accepted in their place of birth. They could not claim either heritage. They thought Britain was their home, identified them with what Britain stood for; it's cultural plurality and enterprise but never treated as equal to her white citizens. What Millat feels about himself is true for most of the immigrants.

He knew that he, Millat was a Paki no matter from where he came from; that he smelled of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shitter, but not a footballer or a film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans.. . (WT 194)

They were already defined, defined as the savage other in the colonial fashion. They could never be what they are. Thus a nation was being constructed within another nation, fed by love for a 'superior' race and aggressiveness for another.

The second generation immigrants lived along the borders. To get recognition and win acceptance they had to look like trouble. "People had fucked Rajith back in the days when he was into chess and wore v-necks. People had fucked Ranil, when he sat at the back of the class and carefully copied all teachers comment into his book. . . But no one fucked them anymore as they looked like trouble." Karim, Millat, Hifan all face the same problems. Karim considers himself lucky to get home safely without serious injury. He speaks about his experience at school, "We did a lot of woodwork at the school because they didn't think we could deal with books. One day the woodwork teacher had a heart attack right in front of our eyes as one of the lads put another kid's prick in a vice and started to turn the handle. ..One kid tried to brand my arm with a red-hot lump of metal." (BS 63) He could not think of studies.

Karim like Millat burns with the desire to do something and become someone in life. Millat becomes 'trouble' while Karim tries to become an actor. But he becomes a victim of racial abuse there too. He is offered the role of Mowgli because he is dark-skinned, small and wiry. Shadwell expects him to be 'sweet but wholesome in the costume'. It turns out to be a bitter experience for him but he has no other way than to accept the role. He has to pander to prejudices. Tracey's objection to Karim's portrayal of Anwar has its origin in the prejudiced notion of whites regarding Asian and Black people. "Your picture is what white people already think of us. That we're funny, with strange habits and weird customs. To the white man we're already people without humanity and then you go and have Anwar madly waving his stick at white boys." (BS 180)

Irie is also a victim of racial abuse. She feels she is all wrong because of the colour of her skin, buckteeth and 'impossible black hair.' In England where white is the norm and black aberration she feels estranged.

The woes of immigrants seem to be never ending. They try to find a place in the British society but are excluded. Immigrant culture is laughed at and their children are forced to change. But they never become part of the whole. Their culture, religion and dark skin mark them and their children as outsiders. The second generation immigrants feel as if they are incomplete or imperfect compared to the whites. Karim tries to come in terms with his mixed origin. He feels that Indians are his own people. Millat is still struggling to find a balance. He joins Kevin to make sense out of his existence. It is his way of taking revenge on a nation that refuses to embrace his uniqueness and robs him of his self-respect. The narrative of the modern nation sets the culture and tradition of the immigrant against monistic notion of citizenship. The immigrant has to cut off his roots from his culture to be accepted in society while racial prejudice follows him everywhere. Multiculturalism is celebrated in political discourse but not in public discourse. When the nation defines itself against the immigrant, it threatens his/her existence by undermining his/her identity and subjectivity. Millat and his crew's participation in the book burning and their opposition to 'future-mouse' experiment are nothing but attempts to get recognition in their society. The crisis that lands Millat and many others in KEVIN may bring some others in the folds of terrorist organizations giving birth to 'home-grown' terrorists. Thus the

novels underscore the need to attach the differences of religion, ethnicity and culture to the commonality of citizenship to build a strong and secure nation.

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