

INHERITED PAST AND FRAGMENTED PRESENT: A POSTMEMORY READING OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA IN ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE TEETH*

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Abstract: This paper exemplifies Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* through the theoretical framework of Marianne Hirsch's concept of post memory, focusing on the transmission of trauma, memory and the historical violence across generations within postcolonial immigrant families. Post memory articulated by Hirsch refers to the powerful and effective relationship second generation bears the traumatic experiences of the first generation. They experienced through the stories, silences, images and behaviours that function as memories. In this novel, the characters such as Irie Jones, Millat, Magid Iqbal and Joshua Chalfen exemplify how colonial histories, war, memories and migration shape the identities of the second generation despite their temporal distance from these events. The parental generation's unresolved traumas include Archie's wartime disillusionment, Samad Iqbal's colonial humiliation and moral anxiety and Clara's inherited religious memory are transmitter to the next generation, where trauma is not merely remembered but lived vicariously by the next generation. This study argues that *White Teeth* presents postmemory as a site of conflict where inherited histories clash with contemporary multicultural Britain, producing identity confusion and resistance. It shows how Smith challenges linear history by portraying memory as an intergenerational and affective forces within postcolonial Britain.

Keywords: Zadie Smith, Postmemory, Marianne Hirsch, Intergenerational trauma, Colonial humiliation.

Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* has been widely celebrated as a landmark in contemporary British fiction, offering a vibrant, polyphonic narrative of multicultural London. The novel interrogates the legacies of colonialism, migration, and war, and how these histories resonate across generations. The novel's expansive cast spanning English, Jamaican, Bangladeshi, and Jewish families embodies the complexities of identity formation in postcolonial Britain. Yet beneath its comic tone lies a profound meditation on trauma, memory, and inheritance. The novel suggests that the past is never fully past; rather, it is transmitted, reimagined, and lived anew by subsequent generations.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of post memory provides a compelling theoretical framework for analyzing *White Teeth*. Postmemory means remembering the past through the memories of others. It's when later generations feel deeply connected to events they didn't live through themselves like war, migration, or trauma because those experiences were passed down through family stories, photos, or cultural tradition. In her influential essay "The Generation of Postmemory", Hirsch defines postmemory as the relationship of the second generation to the traumatic experiences of the first generation. These experiences are not directly remembered but are transmitted through stories, images, and behaviors so powerfully that they seem to constitute memories in their own right. In "The Generation of Postmemory", Hirsch defines postmemory as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before to experiences they remember only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (Hirsch 5). Hirsch emphasizes that postmemory is mediated through representation. Children of survivors inherit not the events themselves but their parents' narratives, silences, and affective responses. These transmissions occur through family, storytelling, photographs, rituals, and even the unspoken atmosphere of trauma. "Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 5).

Applying Hirsch's theory to *White Teeth* allows us to see how Smith dramatizes the intergenerational transmission of trauma within immigrant families in Britain. In the novel, the characters reflect Hirsch's idea of postmemory, where children take on their parents unresolved traumas not as past history but as emotional forces that influence who they become. For example, Samad Iqbal's colonial humiliation and wartime experiences are transmitted to his sons, Magid and Millat, who embody divergent responses to inherited trauma. Similarly, Irie Jones inherits her mother Clara's religious memory and her father Archie's wartime disillusionment, producing a conflicted sense of belonging. These dynamics exemplify Hirsch's claim that postmemory is lived vicariously by the second generation, shaping their subjectivity even in the absence of direct experience.

Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi immigrant and veteran of World War II, embodies the unresolved trauma of colonial subjugation. His wartime experiences, particularly his humiliation as a colonial soldier fighting under British command, haunt him throughout the novel. Samad's obsession with purity and tradition reflects his attempt to preserve a sense of dignity against the erosion of colonial identity. This bitterness is not confined to Samad alone; it is transmitted to his sons, Magid and Millat, who inherit his fractured sense of belonging. Hirsch's concept of postmemory illuminates this dynamic. Samad's trauma is not directly experienced by his children, yet it shapes their identities through his stories, silences, and anxieties. His decision to send Magid

back to Bangladesh reflects his desperate attempt to preserve cultural purity, but it also imposes his unresolved trauma onto his son. Millat, left in Britain, inherits Samad's anger and humiliation, which manifests in his radicalization. As Hirsch notes, postmemory involves "imaginative investment" in the past and Millat's investment in his father's colonial grievances leads him to embrace extremist ideologies. Thus, Samad exemplifies how colonial trauma is transmitted across generations, producing identity conflicts in the second generation.

Archie Jones, Samad's friend from the war and Irie's father, shows a different kind of trauma passed down through families: passive disillusionment. This means that instead of actively dealing with his painful experiences, Archie avoids them and lets chance decide important matters. During the war, he even flipped a coin to decide whether to kill Dr. Perret, a Nazi scientist. This act shows how he relied on luck instead of making a moral choice, because he couldn't face the weight of trauma directly. As Zadie Smith writes Archie believed in chance. He believed in the great wheel of fortune, in luck, in fate. His dependence on chance became his way of coping with unresolved pain. Archie's passivity doesn't stay with him alone—it shapes his family. His daughter Irie inherits this atmosphere of indecision and futility. She doesn't inherit the actual events of the war, but she absorbs the mood of uncertainty and lack of agency, which Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory helps explain. Postmemory means children of trauma survivors don't live through the events themselves but still carry their emotional weight. Irie's search for roots and clarity is her attempt to break free from the passive legacy of her father's trauma. Archie's silence and avoidance show that trauma can be passed down not only through stories but also through what is left unsaid.

Clara Bowden, Irie's mother, shows how both religious memory and cultural displacement can be passed down through generations. Religious memory means the way beliefs, rituals, and even painful experiences connected to religion continue to shape someone's identity, even if they later reject that faith. Clara grew up under her mother Hortense in a strict Jehovah's Witness household, where she was taught apocalyptic teachings - the belief that the end of the world was near and that salvation depended on strict obedience. Although Clara eventually turned away from this rigid faith, the memory of that upbringing still influenced her identity and her relationship with Irie. Her missing teeth, caused by a scooter accident, symbolize more than physical loss; they represent the gaps and silences in her personal history. She lost not only her teeth but also her faith and certainty. Irie Jones, the daughter of Archie and Clara, epitomizes the second generation's struggle with postmemory. She inherits her father's wartime disillusionment and her mother's religious memory, producing a conflicted sense of belonging. Irie's yearning for roots is evident in her desire to connect with her Jamaican heritage. Irie wanted to go back. Back to Jamaica. Back to somewhere where she could be sure of herself. Irie cannot fully escape her parents' histories; instead, she must negotiate them within the multicultural landscape of Britain. Hirsch's framework helps us see how Irie's struggles are not merely personal but are shaped by the transmission of trauma across generations.

Magid and Millat, Samad's twin sons, embody divergent responses to inherited trauma. Magid, sent to Bangladesh, becoming a disciple of science and Western modernity. Millat, raised in Britain, embraces radical Islam, channelling his father's anger and humiliation into extremist ideology. Their divergent paths reflect the complexity of post memory: inherited trauma does not produce uniform responses but can lead to radically different identity formations. Millat's radicalization exemplifies Hirsch's claim that postmemory involves imaginative investment in the past. Millat invests in his father's colonial grievances, reimagining them through the lens of religious fundamentalism. His involvement with KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation) reflects his attempt to find certainty in inherited trauma. As Smith writes, "Millat wanted to belong. He wanted to be part of something bigger than himself" (Smith 423). Magid, on the other hand, tries to escape this inherited trauma by embracing science and rational thinking. But even his assimilation (fitting into mainstream culture) is still a reaction to the trauma he inherited. Together, the twins show how complicated postmemory can be in immigrant families. Joshua Chalfen, though not from an immigrant background, also inherits something from his parents: their intellectual anxieties. His father's obsession with science and his mother's liberal ideals influenced him deeply. Joshua's relationships with Irie and Millat show how he negotiates these inherited ideas in multicultural Britain. Using Hirsch's theory of postmemory, we can see that even non-immigrant families pass down anxieties and obsessions, shaping identity across generations.

Hirsch's framework helps us see how these conflicts are not merely personal but are embedded in broader social and cultural dynamics. The second-generation characters Millat, Magid, Irie, and Joshua inherit their parents' unresolved traumas, but they must negotiate these legacies within the context of contemporary Britain. This negotiation produces conflict, as inherited histories clash with the demands of assimilation, multiculturalism, and modernity. For example, Millat's radicalization reflects his attempt to reconcile his father's colonial humiliation with the realities of British society. Millat's identity confusion reflects the clash between inherited trauma and societal stereotypes, producing resistance in the form of extremism. Similarly, Irie's yearning for roots reflects her attempt to reconcile her parents' fractured histories with her own desire for certainty. Her fantasy of returning to Jamaica is not merely a personal desire but a response to the conflict between inherited trauma and multicultural Britain. Hirsch's notion of postmemory as "imaginative investment" helps us see how Irie's fantasy is shaped by inherited trauma, producing conflict in her identity formation. This connection is not based on actual memory but on imaginative investment means the younger generation projects themselves into the trauma they didn't live through. They imagine, empathize, and emotionally invest in those past experiences so deeply that they feel like their own memories.

The novel shows how postmemory can produce resistance in the form of radicalization. Millat's involvement with KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation) reflects his attempt to find certainty in inherited trauma. His radicalization is not merely a personal choice but a response to the conflict between inherited colonial humiliation and contemporary Britain. This desire reflects the affective force of postmemory, producing resistance in the form of extremism. Magid, by contrast, represents another form of resistance: assimilation. His embrace of science and rationalism reflects his attempt to escape inherited trauma, but it also highlights the persistence of postmemory. Even in his assimilation, Magid cannot

fully escape the burden of inherited trauma; his rationalism is itself a response to his father's obsession with purity. In this way, the twins exemplify how postmemory produces divergent forms of resistance, reflecting the complexity of trauma transmission.

Smith challenges linear conceptions of history by portraying memory as an intergenerational and affective force. The novel suggests that trauma is not confined to the past but continues to shape the present through its transmission across generations. Hirsch's framework helps us see how this transmission occurs through stories, silences, and behaviors, producing affective responses in the second generation. *White Teeth* exemplifies this structure, showing how trauma is transmitted within families and communities, producing conflict in identity formation. The convergence of characters Magid, Millat, Irie, Archie, Samad, and the Chalfens reflects the collision of inherited traumas and contemporary Britain. Millat's attempt to assassinate Dr. Perret, the Nazi scientist spared by Archie during the war, symbolizes the persistence of inherited trauma. This scene dramatizes how postmemory functions as an intergenerational and affective force, shaping identity and conflict in multicultural Britain. By situating postmemory within the context of postcolonial immigrant families, Smith expands Hirsch's framework beyond Holocaust studies. *White Teeth* shows how colonial trauma, wartime disillusionment, and religious memory are transmitted across generations, producing conflict in multicultural Britain. Hirsch's concept of postmemory helps us see how these transmissions occur, but Smith's novel demonstrates their broader social and cultural implications. In this way, *White Teeth* contributes to the expansion of postmemory studies, applying the concept to postcolonial contexts and highlighting its relevance to immigrant literature.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* offers a vivid exploration of how trauma, memory, and historical violence reverberate across generations within postcolonial immigrant families. Millat's extremism, Magid's assimilation, and Irie's yearning for roots all reflect divergent responses to inherited trauma, underscoring the complexity of postmemory in postcolonial contexts. Smith's portrayal of these conflicts highlights how trauma transmission is both affective and creative, shaping identity through imaginative investment in the past. By situating postmemory within the multicultural landscape of contemporary Britain, Smith expands Hirsch's framework beyond Holocaust studies. *White Teeth* shows that postmemory is not confined to a single historical trauma but is a broader structure of transmission across generations, applicable to colonialism, migration, and displacement. The novel suggests that memory is not linear but intergenerational and affective, shaping the present through its persistence in family narratives and cultural identities. Ultimately, *White Teeth* challenges readers to reconsider the role of memory in shaping identity in postcolonial societies. It demonstrates that the past is never fully past; it continues to live in the present through its transmission across generations.

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