

A 'Return' of the Subject in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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ABSTRACT: In postmodernist fiction, subjects are typically portrayed as fragmented. While subjective agency in postmodernism is possible, it occurs only at the price of self-fragmentation or even self-dissolution, as famously exemplified in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). Now, as I suggest here, after decades of postmodernist irony and insecurity, contemporary literature is again focusing on portrayals of stable forms of subjectivity within a social community. To describe this new kind of subject, I draw on Jean-Luc Marion's concept of the subject as 'receiver' and show how Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* engages with these ideas.

KEYWORDS: Zadie Smith; Post-Postmodernism; Subject; Jean-Luc Marion;

Changing the Subject

For scholars studying contemporary literature, it has by now become a commonplace to point out its main differences to postmodernism. Apart from specific changes in the development of narrative, the main focus in this line of study has been on Postmodernism's contestation of the subject and its possibilities for agency, as well as the question of whether this line of development is continued in fiction nowadays. And indeed, not only the literary subject, but also the other great subjective and totalitarian narratives such as History, God, or the Author, have been proclaimed dead in manifold ways—beginning with Nietzsche in modernism and continuing until Roland Barthes and Frances Fukuyama at the peak of postmodernist thinking.

However, many scholars agree these days that there are signs of a change. This change is becoming noticeable in the choice of literary topics, but also in the realm of narrative style and the portrayal of characters. Most importantly, though, the question of the subject is a recurring issue that pervades much of the published scholarship on the distinctive features of present-day fiction.¹ In this essay, I am falling in line with this kind of inquiry, as well as with the topic of this special issue of COPAS, by addressing a suspected 'return'—or enjambment—of the subject in one particular example of contemporary literature: *White*

¹Cf. e.g. the collections of essays: *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*, Ed. Klaus Stierstorfer, and *Hello, I say, it's me*, Ed. Jan Kucharzewski.

Teeth (2000), the critically acclaimed first novel of British author Zadie Smith. To be able to provide an insightful explanation of what exactly I mean by this ‘new’ kind of subject, I turn to the writings of the contemporary French thinker Jean-Luc Marion who in his philosophy constructs a subject that gains a special form of strength not by being active, but by being receptive and by reacting to its surroundings.

After the modernist and postmodernist times of “deaths” and “endings,” it seems now as if returns in various guises have become a popular claim in contemporary literary criticism,² and I also turn to this idea in my essay. Still, I wish to employ it in a reflected manner and distance myself from the notion that a simple stepping back to old patterns is happening in contemporary literature. Instead, I believe that the kinds of subjects that we encounter in novels like *White Teeth* have gone through some significant changes. They are part of a development that has absorbed, and reflected on, the various critiques of postmodernism and that is now moving on to result in new ideas and concepts.

Subjectivity in Postmodernism: Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981)

In order to clearly elaborate the contrast I observe between subjectivity in postmodernist and contemporary literature, I begin by providing some insight into the way subjectivity is treated in postmodernism. Postmodern works of art and fiction do not pose questions about the world that could be answered. Instead, the world itself becomes questionable. There is often doubt about the truth of any presented entity (cf. McHale 10). Meaning is always in regress. Here, subjects are typically portrayed as fragmented; they are constantly being pulled apart or undermined by context, and there is often serious uncertainty about the stability of the narrated world at hand. While there remain some possibilities for agency for subjects in these literary works, they usually come at the cost of self-fragmentation or even self-dissolution.

Many critics have already pointed out parallels between Zadie Smith and Salman Rushdie (cf. for example Dominic Head, Laura Moss and Matthew Paproth). And indeed, it does not

² Cf. e.g. the conference “Return of the Narrative,” held in January 2014 at the University of Amsterdam.

seem too far-fetched to compare two writers who are both concerned with intercultural as well as religious and secular relations and the struggle of individual subjects who are situated in hybrid states in-between these influences. Therefore, I turn to Rushdie's critically acclaimed novel, 1981 Booker Prize winner *Midnight's Children*, as an example of postmodern construction of literary subjectivity. This novel presents the story of Saleem Sinai, who is born at the stroke of midnight on the very day India became an independent nation. In addition to general similarities in choice of topic between the two writers, *White Teeth* shows a line of striking resemblances to *Midnight's Children* in particular. Lewis MacLeod lists a few concrete examples for these, even criticizing them as "unreasonably straightforward." (159) As he explains, while *Midnight's Children* uses the nose as a metaphor with many ramifications and describes it as "the place where the outside world meets the world inside you" (17), *White Teeth* employs metaphors of teeth/the oral cavity in a similar way.³ Also, two of the main protagonists in *White Teeth* are twins who embody countless antagonisms—e.g. in regard to history, religion, and science, just to name a few. *Midnight's Children's* Saleem, albeit not having a biological twin, is accompanied by a metaphorical one: Shiva, the child with which he is switched immediately after birth. Therefore, in telling the story of his family and the upbringing that shaped him, he is actually referring to somebody else's family. His quasi-twin, and antagonist, is also born the minute after Midnight on India's Independence Day, and grows up to incorporate the opposites of Saleem's character traits. These, however, are just two of the instances MacLeod mentions in making the larger argument that Smith limits herself and her writing when she models her hybrid characters so much after the example of Rushdie.

While I agree with his assessment of Rushdie's work as an important influence for Smith, I still view *White Teeth* as an example of a significant development taking place in

³ The nose is also the site of the gifts Saleem is endowed with because of the special circumstances of his birth. He not only has an extremely acute sense of smelling; his nose also gives him telepathic powers. While teeth do not hold any special powers in *White Teeth*, they do serve as a multi-layered symbol throughout the book, e.g. representing the connection to one's history through root canals. Clara Bowden, one of the protagonists, knocks out her front teeth in an accident at the exact moment in her life when she changes it drastically and leaves her family roots behind, parting ways with her mother who is a Jehova's Witness.

contemporary literature in our current moment. In spite of the striking similarities in characters and motifs (like hybridity, history, religion), *White Teeth's* portrayal differs greatly from Rushdie's and is resonant with some of the general changes emerging in literature today. I will elaborate this in the following.

From Saleem's birth at the moment of the nation's birth, the Indian state is allegorically projected onto him, thus allowing the reader to identify with him, feeling India's pain and disrupted condition in a personalized way. Still, the novel does not depict postcolonial subjects as desperate or powerless. Instead, it indicates several very constructive aspects that are crucial to subject constitutions in a hybrid, postcolonial situation. Saleem shows severe resistance against anyone who tries to nail him down or pigeonhole him. In a manner typical for postmodernist portrayals of literary subjects, he rebels against simple, binary definitions of self and subjectivity. In a conference of all the eponymous *Midnight's Children*, he proclaims:

Do not permit the endless duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and-labor, them-and-us to come between us! We, I cried passionately, must be a third principle, we must be the force which drives between the horns of the dilemma; (Rushdie 255)

This exclamation shows his resistance against a simple classification of his self and his personality. Rejecting the descriptions that are made by others, he chooses to overcome the limits imposed on him by various discursive forces. He ultimately manages to do so, but only by deforming, fragmenting, and ultimately dissolving his own self. He is determined to rebel against the concept of a clearly defined and easy-to-grasp identity, but succeeds only at the cost of his integrity. Thus, in this example, the only strength and agency that a postmodern subject has lies precisely in his own power of self-destruction.

After Postmodernism: The Subject as Part of its Social Surroundings

Now, after decades of postmodernist fragmentation, irony, and insecurity, contemporary literature once again focuses on portrayals of stable, functional subjects within a social community, thus "countering the total irony that has left the postmodern individual feeling fragmented, in a state of skepticism and solipsism" (den Dulk 136). In Zadie Smith's portrayal of three London families, there is a strong expression of the individual's quest for common values and ways of living, be it through tradition, history, or religion. Like Saleem in

Midnight's Children, the characters in Smith's novel are subjected to discursive powers on different levels. Most importantly, ideas of the 'nation' and 'race' work as elements that determine the characters' personal identities. The situation of the protagonists is in most cases hybrid, as they are from Bengali, Jamaican or Polish origin. As I showed in the previous example, in postmodernist literature dealing with hybridity, subjects are capable of agency. The problem is that this usually runs at the cost of their integrity: they remain scattered and fragmented. Now, in the case of *White Teeth*, the hybrid situation, even if depicted as antagonistic and problematic, turns out to be a source of subjective power and strength. Contrary to postmodernist novels such as Rushdie's, I will argue, the subjects in *White Teeth* manage to withdraw from these discursive powers without the drawback of self-fragmentation. In spite of them, they even develop a strong kind of agency and self-determination and emerge as unified, stable subjects.

A Figure of What Comes After the Subject: Jean-Luc Marion's "Gifted" Subject

To work towards a better understanding of strong subjectivity as it is constructed in *White Teeth*, I draw upon Jean-Luc Marion's philosophical work on the subject. His conception of the notion is informed by theology and phenomenology and differs greatly from rationalism's all-constituting Cartesian Ego. Though Marion questions the world-creating power of modern subjectivity, he does not remain within the poststructuralist aporias of the fragmented or dead subject, but introduces the notion of the gifted subject—that is, one that has agency while still being able to preserve its integrity. For him, the body of the receiving instance—that is, "the gifted"—(*Being Given* 52; 262) is "a figure of what comes after the subject", (*Being Given* 282) or, in other words: a return of the subject. In his essay "The Reason of the Gift" he sketches this new conception of subjectivity by drawing a connection between the subject and what he calls the "givenness" of the gift.

On principle, he concurs with what Jacques Derrida has long concluded about the impossibility or aporias of the gift: as soon as there is a gift, it becomes part of an immanent circle of economic exchange. This circle cannot be transcended, since not only money, but even the slightest appearance of anything in return deletes the gift as such. A gift that has become part of an economy cannot be a gift anymore. Consequently, this is Derrida's conclusion: the gift is simply impossible (cf. Derrida 27).

Yet, Marion is not paralyzed when confronting this aporia; instead, he makes it his starting point. His concern is whether the gift can appear as something that remains outside the realm of economy, but within the realms of actuality and immanence. The answer is that the gift can actually appear, if it manages to free itself from economic reason. He names two elements that make this possible—excess on the one hand, and loss on the other—explaining that these stand in strong contradiction to the principles of economic rationality. Whether you presuppose an exchange that happens at a loss on the one hand, or an exchange that makes possible excess on the other—both are highly inconsistent with the logic of economic exchange where one would usually presuppose a kind of quantifiable equality between what is given away and what is received in return. To be able to conceive of the gift as something characterized by loss or excess, it has to be thought of as disconnected from causality and reciprocity. This means detaching the gift from the three instances that usually make up the gift: the giver, the receiver (or, to use Marion's term, the "givee") and the given gift. As Marion explains:

The gift is given more perfectly the more it is ignorant either of the giver who is compensated by his (good) conscience, or of the givee who is freed from all consciousness (of debt), or of the given that is recoverable as an exchange value by a (commercial) consciousness. The gift is reduced to givenness by being brought about without any consciousness of giving (*conscience de don*)—without the self-consciousness that would make it render reason of its accounts and multiply reciprocity. (Marion, "The Reason of the Gift" 116)

The very beginning of *White Teeth* offers an example for such a gift that is excessive and given without a consciousness of giving. It describes Archibald Jones, one of the novel's main protagonists, trying to kill himself in front of a halal butcher's shop. When the shop owner stops his suicide attempt, he emphasizes that he does not do it out of concern for the other man's life. Used to taking (animal) lives by profession, the butcher adopts a matter-of-fact stance when confronted with a suicidal person at his workplace instead. He wants Archie to leave his premises in order to avoid any possible hygienic or legal problems: "We're not licensed for suicides around here. This place halal. Kosher, understand? If you're going to die round here, my friend, I'm afraid you've got to be thoroughly bled first." (6) Although the owner does not have a conscience of giving any kind of gift, he causes Archibald to have an epiphany: "[...]for the first time since his birth, Life had said yes to Archie Jones. [...]Life wanted Archie. She had jealously grabbed him from the jaws of death, back to her bosom."

(6). This unexpected experience is, in fact, excessive, since it has a continuous, life-changing effect on the subject. Subsequently, Archie has a newly found zest for life and is motivated to pursue new things after his failed first marriage – therefore the gift has made possible not only Archie’s life in itself, but also all the novel’s events that are to follow.

In *Being Given*, Marion’s seminal work on the phenomenology of givenness, he broadens his description of the gift and introduces the concept of the saturated phenomenon. This concept can be helpful for understanding that the structure of an immanent gift applies to different situations, especially to events, not being limited to gifts in the common sense. The saturated phenomenon follows the structure of an event: it happens unpredictably, without any previous expectation of it. It also appears without any sufficient reason, by chance and in utter contingency.

The appearance of the saturated phenomenon happens as an *anamorphosis*. This concept by Marion finally leads me to the role of the subject within his theory. He describes as an anamorphosis the appearing of a phenomenon; its ascent into visibility (cf. Marion, *Being Given* 123). Anamorphosis is derived from the Greek, literally describing the movement of a phenomenon into its own form. In this way, the phenomenon shows itself unexpectedly in front of a receiver, who in turn, by recognizing the phenomenon, makes it appear. The receiver, therefore, must be thought of as a more or less passive figure. Unlike the all-constituting Cartesian subject, s/he does not function as the initiator of any phenomenon. Still, s/he has a crucial role in the phenomenon’s appearance: only the witnessing receiver manifests the phenomenon, it is his or her position only that enables the phenomenon to become part of immanence and reality. In the above-mentioned example from *White Teeth*, it is Archie’s tendency to view the shop owner’s interference as a gift from the heavens or, in other words, from Life herself. Therefore, he himself enables the gift of life to unfold. The phenomenon, in turn, makes the subject come to life as “the gifted” —a witness of the event as well as the receiver of his or her own subjectivity. The subject is thus defined through its receptivity.

At first glance, this may seem as a degradation of the subject, leaving it dependent and posterior in relation to the phenomenon. Marion, however, describes a different form of strength and active participation. The subject’s situation is determined by intuition more

than intention. The act of positioning oneself in just the right position towards the phenomenon and, in so doing, helping it come to life, does not require the subject's rational knowledge or judgment, nor does the subject develop its attitude out of an objective, rational approach. It is a subject of feeling and sensing, as opposed to knowing and judging. This kind of subjectivity results directly from the excess of the phenomenon; its excess and saturation have an overwhelming effect on the subject, effectively calling and summoning it.

I want to argue that the role of the "gifted," as described in Marion's theory, can be made highly productive in the analysis of a new mode of subjectivity found in contemporary literature. The gifted subject is active and strong, positioning itself towards its surroundings and the cultural forces in it, accepting the event and emerging as a new self, endowed with agency.

***White Teeth*—A Subject to Review?**

In this section I employ the terminology introduced by Marion for an analysis of *White Teeth*. At almost 500 pages, the novel is epic in its scope, covering at least five generations and almost 150 years of colonial and postcolonial history.⁴ The plot centers around two families living in London at the end of the 20th century. Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal are old war comrades. They are fundamentally different characters—Samad is intensely religious, but feels torn by the secular demands of life that he believes are threatening his faith. A certain naiveté characterizes Archie, on the other hand. He is extremely indecisive; he makes almost every decision, important or not, with the toss of a coin. Despite their differences, the two men's friendship persists through the years. They both start families with significantly younger women, and the resulting clash of cultures and generations leads to very humorous descriptions.

⁴ The term "post-colonial studies," of course, has come to denote much more than just the temporal dimension of the historic period after colonialism; many scholars deploy it to include the history, politics, and culture leading up to, during, and even after colonialism (cf. for example Peter Childs et.al.). Here, though, I simply use it to explain the temporal frame covered by the novel.

Samad is a case in point of the novels' central topic: the individual's struggle between competing forces in life. Divided between his religious duties and secular forces, Samad is presented as a devout Muslim appalled by a western, secular lifestyle. Although he is sincerely shocked by the loose morals he is confronted with in his everyday life in England, he himself cannot resist the sexual temptations he encounters in the body of his twin sons' music teacher. When he begins an affair with her, he overcompensates for his own bad conscience and religious disappointment by focusing on his sons. To shelter them from too much 'bad' Western influence, he even takes the radical measure of abducting the elder child and sending him to an allegedly pious life in Bangladesh. Samad's attempt to manipulate his family's future appears extremely calculated, economically-motivated, and rational. He is convinced that if his son is raised in a Muslim country and with a pious education, he will grow up to be a good, faithful, and respectable person. Working as a headwaiter, Samad lacks the financial means to provide for both of his twins abroad. He reasons that one son rescued is better than none, and so he decides to rescue Magid, who is older by two minutes and shows more intellectual promise than the younger Millat. This situation initially shows every sign of a rational, commercial calculation, therefore excluding any possibility of a gift as Marion understands it. This is literally a *quid pro quo* scenario. Samad has to do the math and is focused on calculating the means for the abduction:

And that (if you're counting airfare, dowry, initial schooling fee) was the three thousand, two hundred and forty-five-quid question. Once the money was sorted [...] it was simply a matter of choosing the child. (Smith 163f)

Since he treats it merely as an investment, it does not even occur to him to consider his plan as a moral quandary. The problem for him is not the abduction in itself, but only the question of how to optimize it economically to get the best result out of his investment. This commercial perspective even leads his cruel decision to pick one of the two brothers.

For the first week it was going to be Magid, definitely Magid. Magid had the brains, Magid would settle down quicker, learn the language quicker [...] But then the next week there was a change of heart and it was Millat, because Magid was really Samad's favourite, and he wanted to watch him grow older, and Millat was the one more in need of moral direction anyway. (163f)

Samad knowingly gives away his money and his child, expecting in exchange the return of a modest, religious adult. As the plot unfolds, though, it becomes apparent that Samad's endeavour has outright failed: his plan did not lead to the expected outcome. Magid, raised in Bangladesh under the supervision of the Iqbal family, grows up to become not only an atheist, but the exact opposite of what his father had expected of him:

He wants to enforce the laws of man rather than the laws of God. He has learned none of the lessons of Muhammad—peace be upon Him! Of course, his mother is delighted. But he is nothing but a disappointment to me. More English than the English. [...] They have both lost their way. Strayed so far from the life I had intended for them. (336)

This exclamation by Samad expresses extreme disappointment, but most importantly the realization that the consequences of his rational planning have diverged from his expectations in manifold, mostly negative ways. Magid has developed into an English intellectual and embodies the virtues of the former British colonizer: he is convinced he knows what is best for his country, exhibiting a paternalistic attitude and promoting progressive scientific views that his traditional father fears most. The son raised in London, on the other hand, also develops contrary to all expectations. He turns towards religion a bit too excessively and joins KEVIN, a radical Islamic group with strong conservative ideals and an acknowledged acronym problem. Interestingly, the twins' unexpected changes reflect Marion's concept of the gifted: all the rational planning Samad invests into his son's rescue fails to have the effect he had wished for. In fact, his actions result in an excess of other consequences he could not have foreseen; therefore the twins can be seen as gifted figures. They grow up to be different from everyone's expectations because of their father's decisions. Their whole subjectivity, their character, is formed by what their father had planned for them. Their father's deeds are formed by intentionality and calculation that is misled and therefore goes wrong. It is precisely this calculated initiative that leads to the irrational outcome that is in both cases the opposite of what Samad hoped to achieve.

Another interesting story containing rational plans that take a wrong turn is the description of 'Future Mouse': this Mouse is part of a scientific project, forming the most poignant example *White Teeth* gives for failed attempts at rational manipulation. Marcus Chalfen is the patriarch of the novel's third family, the Chalfens. As a scientist, he is engaged in the

development of the so-called 'Future Mouse.' He genetically engineers a mouse so that specific diseases appear at a programmed point in the mouse's life. At a public conference for the presentation of the 'Future Mouse' on New-Years Eve of 1992, all the families and disparate groups come together, forming a dramatic climax of the novel. Marcus Chalfen has invited his professor and mentor, Dr. Perret, who inspired the entire 'Future Mouse' project. The ominous Dr. Perret, likely modelled after the historical Dr. Mengele, turns out to be a war acquaintance of Samad's and Archie's who had collaborated with the Nazis on a eugenics project during WWII. During the war, Dr. Perret was taken prisoner close to a Bulgarian village where Samad and Archie were stationed. In an especially humorous episode, the novel explains how Samad plays poker with the soldiers who had imprisoned Dr. Perret—and ends up winning custody over him. This, by the way, is just one of many examples in *White Teeth* of situations formed by pure chance and luck (or gamble, in this case) that have far-reaching consequences.

Having gained power over the doctor, Samad devises a plan to kill him so that he and Archie will be celebrated as heroes. The duty of actually shooting Dr. Perret falls to Archie, who goes into the woods with him and returns alone, leading Samad to believe that the deed had been done. Now, decades later at the 'Future Mouse' press conference, the truth comes to light, and Samad finds out that his friend had been lying to him for years.

What strikes me as most interesting in this situation is Archie's lack of intentionality. Although he effectively saves the Dr. Perret's life, Archie does not do it for any kind of moral reason. As is typical for Archie, the decision not to kill the doctor is made simply by the toss of a coin—and while the coin is a strong symbol for the logic and reason of economy, the result it shows, however, is without any reasoning or rationality. On the one hand, Archie's constant doubt and uncertainty could be seen as typically postmodern. In this example, however, this exact trait makes a very special form of agency possible. Any Derridean, postmodern subject in Archie's situation would get lost between the possibilities and end up paralyzed and immobile. He, however, is the perfect receiver precisely because of his indecisiveness. He is willing to accept the outcome the coin shows him, whatever it may be, which is exactly what makes the gift of life possible for the doctor. The event becomes visible in the form of an anamorphosis, appearing before Archie's eyes: "The coin rose and

flipped as a coin would rise and flip every time in a perfect world, flashing its light and then revealing its dark enough times to mesmerize a man.” (447) The coin toss also influences him in another, unexpected way: as he bends over to reach for the fallen coin, his prisoner Dr. Perret reaches for the gun and fires a shot at Archie. In spite of this act of aggression, Archie follows the decision of the coin and still saves the doctor’s life. He never considers straying from the path the coin had set out for him. This event is characterized by excess: it allows the collaborator to live, but it also sets the path for all the other events in the novel, including a special bond between Samad and Archie, who remain lifelong friends.

Not only does Archie save Dr. Perret’s life right after the war, he actually ends up saving him twice. At the press conference, there are various groups present who strongly oppose Chalfen’s research and are willing to take violent action against it. KEVIN, for example, see ‘Future Mouse’ as an interference with god’s creation. The Chalfens’ own son Joshua is part of an animal rights group that is troubled by the abuse of animals for science. During the press conference, Millat as part of KEVIN is the first to take action. Sedated and confused, he rises and takes a shot at the table where the scientists are seated. Without even thinking, Archie jumps up and takes the bullet in his thigh that otherwise would have hit Dr. Perret. As he falls, he stumbles over the mouse’s glass cage. The mouse escapes: because of an impulsive and extremely irrational deed, all the scientific planning of its future becomes worthless in just one second.

This is the second time Archie saves the doctor's life without any sufficient reason for his deed. His subjectivity is not formed by his own planning, rationality, or knowledge; he is rather a receiver of situations that happen, seemingly out of nowhere—situations that have the overwhelming and excessive effect of a gift on all participants, a case in point being the relationship between Archie and Samad. While one might think that Archie’s deceit could lead to a break-up between the two friends, the exact opposite happens:

Captain Samad Miah [...] peers through his reading glasses, and realizes that he has been lied to by his only friend in the world for fifty years. That the cornerstone of their friendship was made of nothing more firm than marshmallow and soap bubbles. That there is far, far more to Archibald Jones than he had ever imagined. He realizes everything at once like the climax of a bad Hindi musical. And then, with a certain horrid glee, he gets to the fundamental truth of it, the anagnorisis: *This incident alone will keep us two old boys going for the next forty years.* It is the story to end all

stories. It is the *gift that keeps on giving*. (441, first emphasis in the original, second emphasis mine)

Samad himself describes this situation as a gift to him, even as one that keeps on giving after years and generations, which is a conception that is as excessive as it is rationally impossible. The situation, therefore, has proven highly excessive. In the beginning, Samad himself just wanted to come out as a war hero, and enhance his own esteem by murdering a Nazi-perpetrator. Then, he undergoes a transformation that comes to him “like the climax of a bad Hindi musical”—or, to put it in Marion’s terms, in the form of an anamorphosis. It is an event that has extreme and overwhelming effects on him, before he can even realize what it means. By being able to accept a different outcome than the one he had expected, he receives something else he had not counted on: a lifelong friendship that will continue to support him for years to come.

Irie Jones, the daughter of Archie and his wife Clara, is another perfect example of the new kind of subject that can be found in contemporary literature. As the daughter of a black Jamaican Mother and a white English father, there are competing forces influencing and troubling her. During puberty she lacks self-esteem and is in desperate need of role models. Her attempts to form one for herself just end up causing her even more problems. In her endeavour to mediate between Magid and his estranged brother after eight years of separation, Irie seeks out both twins in the course of one afternoon. Spontaneously and almost by chance, out of an emotionally difficult situation, Irie sleeps with both of the twins in one day. Afterwards, she finds out that she is pregnant and is at first overwhelmed by the situation:

[...] Irie was eight weeks pregnant and she knew it. What she didn’t know, and what she realized she may *never know*, [...] was the identity of the father. No test on earth would tell her. Same thick black hair. Same twinkling eyes. Same habit of chewing the tops of pens. Same shoe size. Same deoxyribonucleic acid. She could not know her body’s decision, what choice it had made, in the race to the gamete, between the saved and the unsaved. [...] She would never know. (426, emphasis in the original)

Because her child descends from one out of two men who are twins and therefore share the same DNA, Irie will never be able to determine who the father is. Her baby will therefore always remain without a designated origin. This setting is not only a strong symbol for the difficulty of subjects in hybrid situations, but at the same time it mirrors Irie’s own abstract

reflections: it is impossible to make out the one and only root one stems from, or to commit to a side that influences one the most. In a reference to Benedict Anderson's seminal work, *Imagined Communities*, the novel ponders: "That is how her child seemed. [...] A map to an imaginary fatherland." (441)⁵ This seems rather confusing and sad at first, and is actually resonant of postmodern depictions of subjectivity: In *Midnight's Children*, we have a rootless subject situated in a similar setting. Saleem Sinai is the illegitimate child of a poor Indian woman and a British colonial master. He is swapped at birth and raised by a Catholic nanny in a Muslim family. There are numerous national, cultural, and religious forces in his life that are competing for dominance. While Saleem rebels against these limiting forces and thus proves the agency of the postcolonial subject, it still does not end well for him. At the end of the novel he is literally dissolved, scattered into pieces like Tyrone Slothrop in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Irie, on the other hand, turns her initially difficult situation into a source of strength for her and her child. It is effectively a gift for both of them, helping her to imagine a new role for herself and the child within a community:

Irie's child can never be mapped exactly nor spoken of with any certainty. Some secrets are permanent. In a *vision*, Irie has seen a time, a time not far from now, when roots won't matter anymore because they can't because they mustn't because they're too long and they're too tortuous and they're just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it. (437, my emphasis)

This vision is clearly aesthetic in nature: Irie is well aware of the problem that a mixed racial background can pose for an individual in society, because she has lived through it herself. Still, she envisions her child to become the site where differences in race and origin do not matter anymore. On the one hand, it is not the description of a real condition, but merely a vision. As such, it includes a social-utopian dimension that is plainly marked as unrealistic. On the other hand, though, Irie deliberately allows the aesthetic, utopian part of her vision to win over any rational fear and skepticism. In fact, the novel even ends on such terms and presents the aesthetic realization of Irie's vision to stand for itself. It describes a

⁵The idea of an "imaginary fatherland" is not only an allusion to Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" (1983), thus implying a critique of nationalism, it is also another explicit reference to Salman Rushdie and his collection of essays entitled "Imaginary Homelands." (1992)

snapshot seven years hence of Irie, Joshua, and Hortence sitting by a Caribbean sea (for Irie and Joshua become lovers in the end; you can only avoid your fate for so long), while Irie's fatherless little girl writes affectionate postcards to *Bad Uncle Millat* and *Good Uncle Magid* and feels free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings? (448, emphasis in the original)

The question mark at the end of the quote indicates critical reflection and doubt about the utopian implications of this vision. The skepticism that prevailed in postmodernism is not forgotten. But, instead of winning over and leading the subject to endless hesitation and fragmentation like it did in *Midnight's Children*, here it has the function of a marker for awareness. Irie is very aware of the problems and difficulties that her child will confront in the future. Notwithstanding this knowledge, she decides to accept the situation she is in and treat it as a gift. They can therefore both be seen as gifted: the child has received the gift of life and its identity by an unknown father.⁶ Irie is, naturally, the receiver of her child. Her daughter is not only a gift per se, but she embodies Irie's vision and all the hopes she has for her own future. Precisely because there is no father, a certain origin is missing. As a result, Irie feels free from the burdens of the past and can begin imagining a new life.

Conclusion

In Zadie Smith's portrayal of three London families in *White Teeth*, there is a strong expression of the individual's quest for common values and ways of living. The characters in the novel are subjected to discursive powers on different levels, including race and nation, which seem most important here. The novel debates questions of diaspora on various levels and depicts the emotional difficulties that subjects experience when trying to deal with displacement. In the beginning of the novel, one might even get the impression that hybrid identities were described as problematic per se. But in Smith's subtle and often very humorous characterization of her protagonists, the idea of simple, non-hybrid Englishness in itself is made questionable throughout the course of the narrative. While Rushdie's

⁶Marion considers the concept of fatherhood as one of the strongest forms of the gift, since it includes itself, the child, as well as life as a principle and is therefore highly excessive. (cf. for example "The Reason of the Gift" 121)

postmodern subject was nomadic, rootless, and always differing from any designated identity, Smith strives to move away from this notion. She is very keen to describe subjects as an integral part of their social, cultural, and historical surroundings. Although often feeling strange and dislocated (a feeling that in *White Teeth* is not limited to immigrants, by the way), Smith's characters are always part of something that forms them: an immigrant group, a London suburb, or most importantly, a family. In *Midnight's Children*, all the elements of one's surroundings are entrenched within the discursive powers that have a destabilizing effect on the subject. In *White Teeth*, by contrast, one's surroundings have a different effect. As the subjects in this novel position themselves towards their surroundings, they are able to use their intuition in order to recognize a potential for excess. They accept the gifts that emerge from this excess, which helps them to develop a strong sense of self, and in consequence, a new form of agency.

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