Women Deconstructing History in Search of their Own Voice and Identity

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Abstract:

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* focuses on immigrants' life experiences in the postwar British society. The novel is said to herald a new voice of multiculturalism and is often compared to the construction of hybrid identity that writers such as Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi explore in their works. In her portrayal of an evolving multicultural British society, Smith takes a broader approach as she introduces characters from different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds to show how people from diverse backgrounds adapt and negotiate their identities. While I pay attention to questions of race, identity, multiculturalism, hybridity, and migration, I seek to examine in detail the place of history in nation building, especially in relation to the way history is deconstructed and rearticulated by women in their construction of a rhizomatic womb-space. I contend that an exploration of women's history or *herstory* in Smith's novel is not only important because it provides an alternative history that speaks of women's experiences but more so because of the new world and social relations that it constructs as it emphasizes journeys, (dis)connections, ruptures, and displacements as possible modes of identity formation for women rather than the stable core or continuities that history promotes.

Keywords: Herstory, multiculturalism, rhizomatic womb-space, identity negotiation, hybridity, space, social relations, migration, and emplacement.

Introduction

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* focuses on immigrants' life experiences in the postwar British society. The novel embodies a cross-cultural and cross-generational reading of a multiracial and multicultural British society as it speaks of the challenges both immigrants and non-immigrants, first and second-generation characters, women and men, face in an ever-changing English society. Unlike Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, which focuses on the initial contact between first-generation immigrants and white English "natives," Smith takes a broader approach to the complex nature of the British multicultural society both during World War II and many decades after the *Windrush* experience. She introduces characters from different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds represented by the families of the Iqbals, Joneses, and Chalfens to show how people from diverse

backgrounds adapt and negotiate their identities in a multicultural British society. These families are made up of many generations of immigrant men and women, young and old, Jamaican, Bangladeshi, and German/Polish people, all trying to recreate their identities. In other words, these three families show the complex relationship evident among immigrant communities in England and the transformations they bring to bear as they work towards social integration. Thus, the inter-racial tensions arising from racism, discrimination, segregation, gender inequality, and unequal job opportunities portrayed in *Small Island* before and after WW II are undermined as these immigrants, in one way or the other, forge new relationships as they are brought together by different circumstances and events that unfold in their society. The stories that the characters embody inform the reader that everybody, irrespective of class, gender, and nationality, is struggling to adapt to the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural realities of the time. Thus, questions of identity, belonging, boundary negotiation, search for roots, and displacement are articulated to explain the challenges the immigrant communities face in their quest to build a multicultural society. This paper explores the challenges immigrants, especially women face in their quest for identity negotiation and integration into British society as well as their contribution towards building a multicultural British society. It also explores the various ways women are deconstructing the dominant history to create their own stories/her-story. I am particularly interested in the future that Irie envisions and nurtures in what I refer to as her rhizomatic womb-space—a social, creative, ideological, and biological space through which women conceive, nurture, and offer new social relations built not on the either/or dichotomy that gender, class, race, and nationality evoke but on fluid identity formations and social relations.

The publication of *White Teeth* in 2000 was said to herald a new voice of multiculturalism and was often compared to the construction of hybrid identity that writers such as Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi explore in their works. In critical analyses of the novel, many scholars have paid particular attention to Smith's portrayal of a British multicultural society. Michele Braun posits that *White Teeth* is acclaimed by many scholars as "a progressive vision of a multicultural Britain" (Braun 2013, 221). Similarly, Perez Fernandez argues that Smith's novel is considered the epitome of multiculturalism. In response to what she considers as the normalization of a multicultural life in Britain, Fernandez notes that "*White Teeth* does not only inscribe what could be, the life of Smith's 'generation' of ethnically diverse individuals in London, but it also attempts to normalize and validate those experiences as a part of common-day life in Britain" (Fernandez 2009, 146). The normalization of hybridity that Fernandez identifies is also similar to Laura Moss' view that "Smith is part of a generation of writers who have written about hybridity—racial, cultural, and linguistic—as part of the practice of everyday life" (Moss 2003, 11). As Moss notes, the normalization of hybridity comes as a result of "current state of globalization, diasporic migration, and contemporary cosmopolitanism…in contemporary postcolonial communities" (Moss 2003, 12). Although Smith acknowledges tensions arising from immigrants' quest for social integration, she envisions a future where race will no longer be a definitive term for national belonging and identity formation but people, irrespective of gender, nationality, race, will come together to build a more relational British multicultural society.

Many other scholars who are interested in the question of identity and the reconstruction of Englishness have done so either by highlighting on issues of race, science, history and culture that undergird the narrative. Ashley Dawson, Josie Gill, and Mindi McMann explore the impact of science on identity construction by focusing on Marcus Chalfen's FutureMouse project and the possibility that science—in this regard, genetics—not only controls one's understanding of human behavior but also becomes a basis upon which identity is constructed. Gill explores the interconnection of science and fiction and argues that Smith "uncovers the myths about genetics which circulate in contemporary culture" (Gill 2013, 20). In other words, he notes that the past impacts the future both in positive and negative ways. Dawson focuses on the intersection of genetics and race. According to Dawson, "*White Teeth* focuses on the extent to which one's cultural and biological pedigree affect identity and belonging in contemporary Britain" (Dawson 2010, 151). He sees Chalfen's genetically customized FutureMouse project as "a site for experimentation into heredity" (Dawson 2010, 152) and an attempt to control human identity, behavior, and future through racial engineering. Dawson contends that although question of race is not overtly articulated in the novel, Smith's portrayal of Chalfen's FutureMouse project indicates the hold biological determinism has had on the popular imagination. Similarly, McMann traces the long history of cultural and racial changes in England, through what he refers to as "a black box." According to McMann, "a black box is a gap in a chain of mechanisms, when something happens but isn't explained" (McMann 2012, 625). As he further explains, in terms of identity, this gap stands in for the tensions that revolve around identity renegotiation. In the case of *White Teeth*, the fear has been about immigrants losing their black cultural heritage as they come into contact with the English culture. Focusing on second-generation characters, McMann shows how these children struggle with cultural assimilation as well as the fear such assimilation creates in the minds of their parents.

While I pay attention to questions of race, identity, multiculturalism, hybridity, and migration, I seek to examine in detail the place of history in nation building, especially in relation to the way history is deconstructed and rearticulated in the novel by women. Although Paul Gilroy underscores the importance of history in the (re)construction of identity, he notes that history remains unacknowledged. Gilroy argues that, "though history remains marginal and largely unacknowledged, surfacing only in the service of nostalgia and melancholia, it represents a store of unlikely connections and complex interpretative resources. The imperial and colonial past continues to shape political life in the overdeveloped-but-no-longer-imperial countries" (Gilroy 2005, 2). Ironically, both the imperial and colonial pasts that Gilroy alludes to are all male-constructs that have continued to shape the identities of men in both the developed and underdeveloped countries. However, not only are women rendered invisible in these master narratives, the narratives do not provide a basis for feminine identity formations as they speak of dominance and conquest. This is not surprising as history has always been presented as a male construct thereby rendering women outside of or marginal to history.

In this paper, I shift focus away from history constructed by men to underscore different ways history can be reconstructed and re-appropriated for the reformation of individual and national

identities. I do this by exploring the different ways female characters challenge the dominant history as they come up with their own narratives of history or *her-story*. As Susan Friedman notes, the goal of writing women's history "was not to discover the true history, but rather to construct the story of women's experience out of a feminist paradigm or perspectives" (Friedman 1998, 202). The aim, therefore, is to "engage in the deformation of phallocentric history and the reformation of histories that focus on or integrate women's experience and the issue of gender" (Friedman 1998, 202). In this regard, I contend that an exploration of women's history or *herstory* in Smith's novel is not only important because it provides an alternative history that speaks of women's experiences but more so because of the new world and social relations that it constructs as it emphasizes journeys, (dis)connections, ruptures, and displacements as possible modes of identity formation for women rather than the stable core or continuities that history promotes. Thus, the construction of Irie's rhizomatic womb-space evolves partly from the deconstructed history and all the cultural, national, ideological, and social factors that contribute to its writing as well as the silencing of women's voice in its narration. In this regard, the rewriting of history, reconstruction of identities at both the national and individual levels, empowerment of women, and formation of new social relations undergird Irie's construction of a rhizomatic womb-space. In her rhizomatic womb-space, Irie conceives a new world where fixed identities such as race do not matter because they are complex and delimiting, and where women voices are no longer silenced but are needed in the reconstruction of identities and retelling of history. Irie's rhizomatic womb-space is therefore both biological—as she conceives a child that she envisions will be an embodiment of the changes that she seeks to create—and social, as she uses it to foster different ways of living, ideas, and social relations. It is also ideological in that she wants people to think beyond fixed identities such as race, class, root, nationality, and gender to other possible forms of social relations that allow fluid identity formations.

Rhizomatic womb-space

The rhizomatic womb-space is a term I coined from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of rhizome, on the one hand and from Ancient Greek philosophy of the wandering uterus/womb, on the other hand. It is constructed with the aim of revising dominant histories and cultures as well as creating other new spaces for minority voices to be heard and minority stories to be retold. The rhizomatic womb-space pushes for new social formations and relations that are informed by multiplicity, divergence, and connectivity. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari explain in their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, the rhizome gives room for multiplicity and interconnectivity and establishes a non-hierarchical relationship where different unrelated things are connected. The rhizome resists fixed points of emergence and rootedness. According to them, when a rhizome is broken in one location, it emerges elsewhere with multiple openings and growths. In this regard, a rhizome does not produce a single trait but leads to other connections, thereby creating multi-dimensional assemblages that can come from one of its old lines or a completely new line. Thus, the rhizome defies any rigid classification as it seeks to disrupt even the root that produces it. In connecting

the concept of the rhizome to the Ancient Greek philosophy of the wandering womb as seen in the works of Plato and Hippocrates, my goal is to show how women have not only resisted their subjugation but have also redefined themselves through migration and other cultural and social relations.

In Ancient Greek philosophy, the womb was seen as a living animal that was capable of moving about in the female body as a result caused a lot of discomfiting problems to the female body and mind. In Plato's *Timaeus*, he describes the womb as a living animal desirous of childbearing, which is distressed when it is not fruitful, hence its wandering in the female body:

> The so-called uteruses…in women—there being in them a living animal desirous of childbearing…whenever it is fruitless for a long time beyond its due season, being distressed it carries on with difficulty and by wandering in every direction throughout the body, by fencing off the passages of breath, and by not allowing (the body) to catch its breath, it throws it (the body) into the extremes of helplessness and provokes all other kinds of diseases. (qtd in Faraone 2011, 3)

Not only does Plato describe the womb as a living animal desirous of childbearing, he also portrays it in a negative light—as capable of causing pains in women when it is not sexually satisfied and as one that can only be satisfied through its connection to the male. He frames the female body as dependent on men and one that derives satisfaction and completeness only in relation to men. In Hippocrates' account of the wandering womb, he focuses on the different places the womb can attach itself and the various pains that come because of its wandering:

> If the uterus seems to sit under the diaphragm, the woman suddenly becomes speechless … and she experiences suffocation; she grinds her teeth and, when called, does not respond. When the womb strikes the liver or abdomen … the woman turns up the whites of her eyes and becomes chilled; some women are livid. She grinds her teeth and saliva flows out of her mouth. These women resemble those who suffer from Herakles' disease (i.e., epilepsy). If the womb lingers near the liver or abdomen, the woman dies of suffocation. (qtd in Faraone 2011,4)

Apart from Hippocrates's elaboration on the pains that the wandering womb causes women, he also considers the female body as physiologically cold and capable of producing fluids, which must be purged. To stop the womb from wandering, therefore, different recommendations were made ranging from getting married, if the woman is single to keep the uterus moist through constant sexual intercourse as well as to stop it from attaching itself to other moist parts of the body; and if married, the woman was encouraged to become pregnant. If the womb has wandered, it was recommended that baths, uterine infusions, and a series of physical manipulations and bindings of the abdomen be applied to force the womb back in place.

Contrary to the notion that the wandering womb affected women negatively by causing them hysteria, I have reconceptualized the womb as a productive space and used it to show the many ways women renegotiate their identities at different positions they find themselves in society. It is my

contention that the wandering womb, even in its representation in the Ancient Greek period, is a subversive object that not only resists control and fixity but also creates its own pathway as it wanders in search of moisture and satisfaction in other parts of the female body. In other words, the wandering womb defies any notion of fixity, origin, and root as it moves about in search of its own identity and positionality. Significant is the fact that when the womb "wanders" from one place to another, it does not only occupy a new position but also connects to other parts of the female body and adapts to new locations. In this regard, it becomes rhizomatic as it creates multiple identities for itself because it is not one part of the female body that is connected but multiple unrelated parts that meet at each point of contact.

Re-appropriating the concept of the wandering womb, I set forth to explore how women, though displaced, can begin to redefine their identities by breaking barriers, charting their own course, connecting with different people, and taking new social positions in their new social milieu. I argue that, like the wandering womb, women who migrate reconstruct their identities in relation to routes and through various connections and contacts they make rather than through roots. The rhizomatic womb-space, therefore, is a radical feminine space through which women not only critique those values that inhibit one's self-fulfillment but also offer new social relations, renegotiate their identities, and envision a new world built not on the "either/or" dichotomy that gender, class, race, and nationality evoke but on fluid identity and multiple connections. Thus, like the wandering womb that detaches itself from its original location to create a new space for itself, I contend that although women are displaced in various ways, their displacements offer them an opportunity to create new identities and spaces for themselves in their new social milieu.

The construction of rhizomatic womb encourages multiculturalism, change in perception and a critique of dominant ideology, history, and traditions that promote fixed identity formation and limit women to the domestic sphere of childbearing and rearing. Not only does it challenge the traditional ways of doing and defining things, it also gives room for new social formations and diversity, especially in terms of people's relationship with those from other ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries. Unlike the traditional concept of womanhood upon which the concept of wandering womb was situated in the Ancient Greek philosophy, women situated in a rhizomatic womb spaces transcend their traditional gender roles that confine them to the domestic space to engage in other roles in the public spaces. They consider not marriage and children as their greatest achievements but their ability to foster new social relations and nurture new ideas geared towards inclusion, tolerance, and diversity. There is also a conscious effort to bridge the gap between the private/domestic space and the public space as they make the family a microcosm of the nation. Thus, the rhizomatic womb-space becomes a metaphor for women's movements, journeys, rootlessness, displacements, pains, quest for change, and ruptures. In this regard, the construction of the rhizomatic womb-space becomes a journey in itself (both physically and mentally) that requires the individual characters to reposition themselves socially, linguistically, culturally, spatially, and ideologically in terms of identity renegotiation and social integration. In other words, it is a

journey that demands that people give up those negative values that undermine their self-potential as well as confine them. This, in essence, means that women must strive to move away from their places of displacement to new areas of emplacement.

As a theoretical construct, the rhizomatic womb-space is defined as a site of radical openness that pushes for new social formations and relations that are informed by multiplicity, divergence, connectivity, and quest for change. It is a social, creative, intellectual, and ideological feminine space that is interested in questions of identity, gender, (un)belonging, and the critical interventions that women make in their immediate families and nations at large. It is also a biological space that explores mother-child relationship and how women have been able to redefine the sociocultural and political landscapes through childbearing and rearing. In situating characters in a rhizomatic womb-space, therefore, what is important is not race, class, gender, or nationality but making connections, giving voice to the voiceless, redefining women's social (re)positioning, and fostering new social relations geared towards creating a conducive environment for people as well as breaking not just one new ground but multiple ones as people begin to question and critique the binary oppositions that set them apart, create new spaces for minority voices to be heard and minority stories to be retold. However, rather than the traditional approach, the construction of rhizomatic womb-space requires a new approach that rejects the either/or dichotomy that underlies identity formation and social relations as it privileges a multiple and diverse approach to sociocultural issues. The message undergirding the construction of rhizomatic womb space is simple, it is all about change in perception, inclusion, (re)orientation, ideology, and social relations. No more shall the future be left in the hands of one group or history be dependent on one voice but everybody irrespective of class, nationality, race, and gender has a stake in the community and nation at large and is capable of constructing a rhizomatic womb-space as well as fostering new social relations. The construction of a rhizomatic womb-space, therefore, requires constant renegotiation of identity, devising alternative ways to traditional approach to life, social and ideological repositioning, connection, reevaluation of history and root and fostering new social relations.

Analysis

In *White Teeth*, the initial task of deconstructing racial identity and history rests on Alsana, Samad's teenage wife. Alsana is aware that as an immigrant and a woman, she faces double displacement—one from her host community and the other from the dominant culture and history. The dominant history, as she notes, is one that upholds men's acts of heroism by first making women invisible. Alsana is also aware that the dominant history has always provided men a platform upon which they construct their masculine identities. However, in view of the challenges before her, it is not by accident that Smith offers her the opportunity to deconstruct the dominant history upon which men construct their identities. In an early chapter that portrays men's participation in World War II entitled, "The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal," the narrator indicates, "it is all very well, this instruction of Alsana to look at the thing close up; to look at it dead

straight between the eyes; an unflinching and honest stare, a meticulous inspection that would go beyond the heart of the matter to its marrow, beyond the marrow to the root" (Smith 2000, 72). Looking at the war narrative "close up" as she has been instructed to do, Alsana tells the reader that the dominant history upon which Samad and Archie construct their masculinity is all "shitty lies!" (Smith 2000, 69). She asks, "if they are heroes, where are their hero things? Where are the hero bits and pieces? Heroes—they have things. They have hero stuff. You can spot them ten miles away. I've never seen a medal...and not so much as a photograph" (Smith 2000, 69). Thus, by pushing for proof of their heroism, Alsana "puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies....She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths" (Anzaldúa 1999, 104). Aware that the war history that these men represent is partial as women are not adequately represented in it, Alsana distances herself from it in order to create her own personal history. Thus, by critiquing history, Alsana opens a space—in this regard, a radical space of enunciation, from which she seeks to reconstruct a new historical narrative as well as reconstruct her own identity. In her relationship with Samad and other men, therefore, Alsana does not allow their ideas to overshadow hers. She constantly makes them realize that she has a voice of her own and can speak for herself. In one of such occasions that Samad tries to impose his ideas on her, Alsana strongly opposes that. She tells Samad that they have both followed different routes and as such have different identities and ideologies: "I do not serve what you worship, nor do you serve what I worship. I shall never serve what you worship, nor do you serve what I worship. You have your own religion, and I have mine...[You] will whistle [your] tune and I will whistle mine" (Smith 2000, 189).

Alsana's vision is not only to deconstruct the dominant history but also to build bridges that connect people of different races, genders, and historical periods. It is through Alsana that Smith conceives of a marriage between the past and the present that does not exclude anyone based on race or gender. It is also through Alsana that Smith begins to articulate a multicultural British identity built on tolerance, accommodation of minority groups and voices, and respect for different cultures. In her discussion with Clara and Niece of Shame (her lesbian niece who, by virtue of her sexual orientation, is designated a shame to the Black community, hence her name, Niece of Shame), she tells them that her twins "will always have daddy-long-legs for fathers. One leg in the present, one in the past. No talking will change this. Their roots will always be tangled" (Smith 2000, 68). In other words, she envisions a fluid identity for her children rather than a fixed one—an identity that is not rooted in the past but transcends it as her children embrace the transformations taking place in the present, which they anticipate will shape the future. Unlike Samad who advocates for cultural purity, Alsana objects racial and cultural purity. Rather, she argues that racial purity is an illusion. According to her, "you go back and back and back and it's still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It's a fairy tale!" (Smith 2000, 196). Instead of upholding racial purity, Alsana envisions a crisscrossing of different roots as she notes that the future identity does not depend on one's ancestral roots but the different routes and cultures that one has been exposed to.

Similarly, Alsana contends that a multicultural and hybrid identity is only a mirage if people do not respect other people's cultures, religions, and beliefs. She exemplifies this by burning the things that her son, Millat, holds so dear when she sees him on television burning Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verse*. According to Alsana, "everyone has to be taught a lesson.... Either everything is sacred, or nothing is. And if he starts burning other people's things, then he loses something sacred also" (Smith 2000, 197). She also argues that no one person, culture, religion, or tradition should be considered more important than the other and that people should learn to tolerate one another. As Martha Addante notes, Alsana's message of tolerance is "born out of an understanding that people are 'involved' as a result of their multiple journeys—routes—which have led them all to the imperial centre" (Addante 2008, 80). Alsana illustrates this spirit of tolerance and acceptance of cultural diversity and difference when she tells Samad how her small group works for the interest of everyone. According to Alsana, "when my little group get together, if we disagree about something, we can sort it out. Example: Mohona Hossain hates Divargiit Singh. Hates all his movies. Hates him with a passion. She likes that other fool with the eyelashes like a lady! But we compromise. Never once have I burned a single video of hers.... I live. I let live" (Smith 2000, 195). Accordingly, Alsana contends that, "to be involved in British life, to be British, requires acceptance of collectivity, diversity, and tolerance" (Addante 2008, 80). This spirit of tolerance and acceptability that Alsana represents is at the heart of the new British society that Smith envisions.

Like Alsana, Hortense Bodwen also fights against patriarchy and silencing of women, especially in the public sphere. Her sense of displacement and domination comes from the larger society represented by the church she belongs to. As a member of the Jehovah's Witness church, she is aware that women are displaced and denied freedom of expression as men not only control the church but also the production and distribution of knowledge. In her interaction with Ryan Topps, (a man she not only introduces to the church but accommodates in her house after the demise of her husband) he makes it clear to her that as a woman, she must remain silent in the house of God and that men have received the divine mandate and authority to manage and control the church. As Topps tells Hortense when the latter thinks it is appropriate to dress properly for a church event, "you must avoid interpretin' scripture by yourself, Mrs. Bowden. In future, discuss it wiv myself and my colleagues. Ask us: is pleasant clothing a concern of the Lord's? And myself and my colleagues among the Anointed, will look up the necessary chapter and verse" (Smith 2000, 321). Not only do Topps and his colleagues consider women inferior, they also think that women do not have the power to produce and distribute knowledge, hence the need for them to remain silent. However, reacting against the inferior position that she has been relegated to based on her gender, Hortense tells Mr. Topps that she hears from the Lord too and should be given an opportunity to teach the word of God. According to Hortense, "sometime I tink I could be one of dem dat teach, you know? Even though I am a woman...I feel like the Lord talk to me in a special way...It jus' a bad habit...but so much in the de church change recently, sometimes me kyan keep up wid all de rules and regulations" (Smith 2000, 322). Hortense's admittance of the wrongness in speaking as a woman

comes from her internalization of the Christian values and social codes that inhibit women from occupying the public sphere and speaking publicly too. Such teachings, as one observes, are usually disseminated and enforced by men to maintain their control over women. This fact is buttressed in Topps' insistence that men are naturally endowed with the power to teach others—others in this case being women: "In this life there are them that are teachers and then there are them that are pupils.... But you must learn to leave such fings to them that 'ave the direct line, Mrs. B., the direct line" (Smith 2000, 329). His invocation of the social stratification is an indication of a supposed natural endowment where men are meant to lead women and are equated with power and knowledge and women are forced into silence and passivity.

However, Hortense's recognition of her silenced and marginalized position becomes a steppingstone towards her liberation. Her acknowledgement that society is changing shows her willingness to embrace the winds of change in order to reposition herself and rewrite that history of exclusion. For Hortense, the first thing to do as both a migrant subject and a woman is to decolonize her mind so that she can begin to think of new ways to represent herself in a society that works so hard to keep her down. She tells Irie, her granddaughter:

> Im not like dem Witness jus' scared of dyin'. Jus scared. I gat different aims. I still hope to be one of de Anointed evan if I am a woman. I want it all my life. I want to be dere wid de Lord making de laws and de decisions...I gat so tired wid de church always telling me I'm a woman or I'm nat heducated enough. Everybody always tryin' to heducate you; heducate you about dis, heducate you about dat.... Dat's always bin de problem wid de women in dis family. Somebody always tryin to heducate them about something, pretendin it all about learnin forty-four, no one gwan try to heducate me. Dat would be my job! I'd make my own laws an I wouldn't be wanting anybody else's opinions. (Smith 2000, 338)

Thus, in her self-decolonization mission, Hortense distances herself from the teachings on women's inferiority and subordination as disseminated through the church and western education. She identifies these teachings as one of the challenges the different generations of Bowden women have faced and distances herself from it. She recalls with sadness how her mother becomes a victim of sexual and racial violence in the hands of two British men who claim to be educating her. But as Hortense tells Irie, she is bent on stepping out of this culture that not only silences her but dehumanizes her. Like her male counterparts, she seeks to be in the public sphere and make her own law rather than be controlled by the teachings that privilege and empower men to the detriment of women. Unlike her mother, who blindly followed the teachings of her violators, Hortense seeks to write a new law where women are at the center and not mere followers of patriarchal doctrines. Her desire is to reclaim her voice and to be given an opportunity to be in leadership position just like her male counterparts and not to be subordinated. She sees dialogue as a channel through which she can make her case known to bring about changes in her society and the religious body.

It is not surprising that Irie borrows a new leaf from her grandmother in her quest to educate herself and transform the social relations that have kept the minority people down for so long a time.

Hortense not only encourages her granddaughter, Irie, to be an agent of change but provides her the materials with which to effect the change in society. As a mixed-race child of Archie and Clara, Irie is situated in an ambivalent space—in between two distinct and parallel cultural and racial identities—Jamaican and English, white and black. While this state of in-betweenness becomes a source of trauma to her, on the other hand, it can also be read as symbolic of the position of immigrants in Britain who are neither here nor there as they straddle two cultures—the culture of the homeland and that of the hostland. However, for Irie to be able to create a new identity for herself as well as construct her rhizomatic womb-space, she must overcome her mixed-race identity crisis.

Earlier in the narrative when Irie's identity is mentioned, Samad explains, "she had got her genes mixed up, Archie's nose with Clara's awful buckteeth" (Smith 2000, 124). Samad's reference to Irie's mixed genes characterizes her biracial identity as problematic to the British society at this historical moment as Irie is portrayed as a racialized Other even though she is a British citizen. It also points to the cause of her identity crisis in a society where racial purity is much valued and the desirable female body is white. Unlike her second-generation male counterparts, who fight against racism, Irie has an additional problem arising from her biracial and female body, which is neither recognized nor accepted in the mainstream culture. According to the narrator, "there was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger (sic) land" (Smith 2000, 222). As McMann argues:

> Anxieties about Irie circulate not around her hybrid identity, but around the fact she has a body that signifies blackness, not Britishness....While other characters...struggle with hybridity, we can see that Irie perceives her own body as something abject. The abject becomes that which must be jettisoned in order to enter the semiotic realm—or bluntly, in order to become part of society" (McMann 2012, 629).

Though a biracial child, Irie's physical attributes, which are predominantly Jamaican, displace her from her birthplace—Britain. As the narrator explains, "[T]he European proportions of Clara's figure had skipped a generation, and [Irie] was landed instead with Hortense's substantial Jamaican frame, loaded with pineapples, mangoes, and guavas; the girl had weight; big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teeth. She was 182 pounds and had thirteen pounds in her savings account" (221). It is in relation to this identity crisis that McMann, comparing Irie's challenges in Britain with those of second-generation male characters, contends that "unlike Millat and Magid, whose struggles with being British are the result of the tension between cultures and external desires, Irie's struggle between influences is literally in her genes. Like the twins, she must wrangle with external expectations of who she is...in this way, Irie more so than the twins, embodies racial anxiety in the novel" (McMann 2012, 629).

However, it is in Hortense's house that Irie begins her journey of self-discovery and reconstruction of new identity for herself and her unborn child. The familial history that she discovers while living with her grandmother, Hortense, helps her to imagine a new world beyond the one she finds herself in and seeks in her own ways to construct this world. In other words, her

coming to her grandmother's house creates room for a self-discovery of her identity and history and those of others—including the colonial history that her great-grand father, Captain Durham, represents. Her grandmother's house holds not only the secret of her past, which neither her father nor her mother has been able to tell her but "was an adventure. In cupboards and neglected drawers and in grimy frames were the secrets that had been hoarded for so long, as if secrets were going out of fashion" (Smith 2000, 330). Irie's discovery of her past marks the beginning of her journey towards reconstructing not only her identity but writing a maternal history—a history that foregrounds a new world order that she envisions:

> She had laid claim to the past—her version of the past—aggressively, as if retrieving misdirected mail. So this was where she came from. This all belonged to her, her birthright, like a pair of pearl earrings or a post office bond. X marks the spot, and Irie put an X on everything she found, collecting bits and pieces (birth certificates, maps, army reports, news articles) and storing them under the sofa, so that as if by osmosis the richness of them would pass through the fabric while she was sleeping and seep right into her. (Smith 2000, 331)

In laying claim to her past, Irie is able to resolve the tension arising from her bi-racial identity crisis. Her turning to her maternal roots is in relation to her quest to create a *her-story* since women have been displaced from the dominant history.

Irie's discovery of her own truth from her past also helps her in creating her rhizomatic womb-space—a space through which she seeks to nurture her daughter and the new British society to a new beginning. For Irie, Britain not only needs to recognize the presence and contributions of Africa in its national history but also must be willing to learn from its rich cultural heritage. Thus, in constructing a new British nation, she does not only look inward—to British cultural identity—but also looks outward—to Africa and beyond for inspiration. Her sitting at the Caribbean Sea at the end of the narrative indicates not just a return to the origin but also a desire for interconnectivity, new discoveries, and beginnings. It also shows her defiance to confinement and her desire for redemption and for inclusion of other histories that have contributed to the making of British history. As Stuart Hall contends, "there is no English history without that other history" (Hall 1996, 49). Irie's quest for connectivity and inclusion is also in line with Deleuze and Guattari's clamour for interconnectivity to different ideas, peoples, and concepts and their privileging of routes over roots. Deleuze and Guattari's rejection of roots indicates their opposition to tradition and fixed ideas and identities, hence their position that the rhizome has no beginning or end but a middle where something new begins. For them, the rhizome symbolically represents a site of enunciation and identity reformation—a point of intersection or melting point where new things and growths emerge. In this vein, the rhizome speaks of rupture, recombination, and (re)connections. In other words, rhizomatic constructions are route oriented as they are realized through flights, journeys, reformations, (dis)connections, (dis)placement and ruptures. In Irie's case, it is by distancing herself from her British root that enforces homogeneity and exclusion that she is able to construct her

rhizomatic womb-space for her daughter and for future generations. Her rhizomatic womb-space becomes a new site of multiple identities and new growths. Like the rhizome, Irie's roots and old ideology, once broken and deconstructed produce new growths and new lines of social relations and identity formations. Also, like the rhizome that when broken produces new growths, Irie sees her displacement as a necessary process towards constructing a new world for her unborn child and future British citizens, hence her return to her maternal root, Jamaica, for inspiration.

Irie considers her journey to Jamaica not only as the "beginningest of beginnings"—a beginning of a new world after the apocalypse—the destruction not just of the physical world but also the ideological world of reasoning that categorizes people based on racial, cultural and national identities—but also a discovery of a new world, just like Christopher Columbus's discovery of a new world. Her journey also signals an end of her dependence on Britain for inspiration as she seeks to connect to the world beyond her contemporary British society. She sees the Caribbean Sea and possibly Africa, therefore, as sources of inspiration at a moment in history when British society cannot provide her the mirror with which to see herself and the world around her. The British society that is portrayed is one that prides itself on homogeneity and as such refuses to wholly accept people of other cultures and nationalities, hence Irie's inability to see her image in the British mirror. For Irie, the journey to the Caribbean Sea establishes a new phase in her life as she returns to her maternal root to learn from it. As Irie states, she imagines Africa in general and the Caribbean in particular, as a fertile ground where new identity formations can emerge from:

> Where things sprang from the soil riotously and without supervision, and a young white captain could meet a young black girl with no complications, both of them fresh and untainted and without past or dictated future—a place where things simply were. No fiction, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs—this is how Irie imagined her homeland...And the particular magic of homeland, its particular spell over Irie was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginnings of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page. (Smith 2000, 332)

When one sees Irie, her daughter, Joshua, and Hortense by the Caribbean Sea in the epilogue, it is in fulfilment of her dream of exploring the world to gain the much-needed experience to create her new world—a world without complications, fresh, and untainted. In other words, she conceives a world where people are simply allowed to live without undue interference with history. Thus, the new world that she envisions is one that takes into consideration other people's culture and also defies confinement. It is one that privileges openness, transcultural relationships, and multiple identities. Her vision of her homeland as a "blank page" where new forms of social and racial identities can be written informs Irie's construction of rhizomatic womb-space and it entails the destruction of old values that inhibit self-identity and criss-crossing of many constructive cultural identities.

Irie's unborn child symbolizes the new beginning that Irie envisions—not just in terms of the reconstruction of a new British identity but also in personal identity formation that is needed for the new nation that she conceives. She is "rhizomorphous" as she is an embodiment of different

identities, genes, roots, and histories. By connecting to these multiple identities or traits, Irie;s unborn child breaks the old homogenous British culture that identifies and divides people based on their cultural and ethnic belongings. Biologically, she is the daughter of either Magid or Millat and Irie as Irie has sex with the identical twins within twenty-five minutes interval. In terms of root, she is Jamaican, English, Bangladeshi and Jewish—by virtue of her connection to Joshua, her foster father. She is also a product of racial, colonial, British and familial histories. In fact, as Peter Childs explains, "in Irie's daughter all the families of the book are brought together, mixing British, Caribbean, Bagladeshi, and Jewish heritage" (Childs 2005, 223). But as Irie anticipates, her child will not be pinned down to any of these complex identities and histories but will weave them together for her own good. This is because neither roots nor histories matter nor constitute an important trait to her identity formation. As the narrator explains, "what [Irie] didn't know, and what she realized she may never know...was the identity of the father. No test on earth would tell her.... She thought of those elaborate fictional cartograms that folded out of Joshua's old sci-fi books, his Fantasy Adventures. That is how her child seemed. A perfectly plotted thing with no real coordinates. A map to an imaginary fatherland" (Smith 2000, 427). Irie's child's lack of paternal history is indicative of the fact that tradition, root, ethnic, cultural affiliations, and patriarchal dominance are not important in the new British society that Irie envisions. It also marks the beginning of a new era as well as the changes taking place in Britain with the dissolution of the old British society, especially in terms of repositioning women. It is a new era that witnesses the emergence of women's voice and new social identity.

Undergirding Irie's construction of a rhizomatic womb-space is the notion that rather than homogeneity, fixed identity, and historical past contributing meaningfully to the present conditions or situations, they become a burden and a source of trauma. However, this does not mean that the past does not impact on the present or even the future. It does. But rather than depend on the past and histories, emphasis should be placed more on different connections and routes that have shaped individual's identities. Similarly, rather than race, the choices before the inhabitants of the new sociocultural milieu, as Marcus Chalfen identifies, are not "between a blue eye [English identity] and a brown eye [black identity], but between eyes that would be blind and those that might see" (Smith 2000, 437). The blinded eyes, in this context, refer to those that still uphold racial identities and inequalities. However, for this new British society to be created, Irie recommends that the old structure must be destroyed or reviewed to retain only the positive values. It entails moving beyond any fixed identity for one to embrace other forms of identities that may come from different sources rather than one. Thus, when at the end of the narrative, a new era emerges through the collective efforts of the masses, one witnesses the emergence of women's voice and new social identity formations. In line with Irie and Smith's visions, the destruction of old cultural values makes it possible for women to move from their marginal positions to the center. For instance, on the New Year eve, O'Connell finally opens its doors to women—a place that has been exclusively men's domain as no woman is previously allowed at O'Connell.

Although Smith is aware of the challenges people face in their day to day lived experiences, she is

of the opinion that people can change their situations or identity rather than allow their realities to define them. Smith demonstrates this through the FutureMouse experiment where the life of a mouse is predetermined and controlled by Marcus and his allies. Just like the mouse escapes its biological determinism, she does not want people to be controlled by history or the past. The seven-year life-span of the mouse, as the narrator indicates, has been mapped into its body such that it can be controlled by Marcus: "One mouse only...No question about who is pulling the strings. No question of a journey, no question of greener grass, for wherever this mouse went, its life would be precisely the same. It will not travel through time...because its future was equal to its present, which was equal to its past....No second guessing, no what-ifs....Just certainty (Smith 2000, 405). However, when this mouse escapes from its cage at the end of the narrative, it disrupts its genetic determinism and the ability of its programmers to control it. As Childs contends, in Irie and "Smith's view, the future is not to be engineered like Marcus's mouse, predestined to die after seven years and predetermined to live according to artificial genetic programming, but enriched by cultural commingling, accident and chance (Childs 2005, 218).

It is not only Irie and Smith that are against people living a predetermined life, many other characters in the novel are reacting against the different ways their lives have been controlled in one way or the other. This is demonstrated in the gathering of different organizations and individuals during the launching of the FutureMouse project as they are not there to applaud Marcus but to stop him from carrying out his plans of biological determinism. Most of these people are disillusioned with their present situations and the kind of life they have been forced to live and as such see the caged mouse as reflective of their own inhibition and predetermined life-style—be it culturally, politically, economically, and socially. Thus, in speaking against Marcus' project, they are also expressing their own frustration and willingness to break their barriers in order to bring about change. As Fernandez argues, "the fact that all the characters head to the same point indicates that despite differences, plurality and diversity, there is a common goal, a common place for British society to go in the new millennium...the end of the century will see the beginning of a new era" (Fernandez 2009, 151).

The future that both Smith and Irie envision, therefore, depends on collective effort and the determination to redefine or change those sociocultural and political issues that impede a multicultural society. Significantly, it is the voices of women that are loudest in the clamor for a change and the building of a new British nation. The new national identity that these women are reconstructing is built on multiple identities garnered through routes rather than root and homogeneity. It is also one that is derived from critical appraisal of the old national identities and roots in a bid to open new cultural spaces that allow people to redefine their identities and live an uninhibited life. As the narrator notes during the FutureMouse project, not even the voice of Samad—a symbol of old cultural values constructed through roots and a symbol of patriarchy—could silence these women from speaking up against Marcus and his project. According to the narrator, as "the...women raise their voices, sending song up into the firmament...Samad watches it all and finds himself, to his surprise, unwilling to silence [them]. Partly because he is tired. Partly because he is old. But mostly because he would do the same, though in a different name" (Smith 2000, 439). Thus, when at the end of the narrative, Irie's "fatherless" child

"writes affectionate postcards to *Bad Uncle Millat* and *Good Uncle Magid*" (Smith 2000, 448 emphases in original) she makes a strong case for the recognition of women's contributions and roles in redefining and restructuring not only British national identity but the world in general. By referring to Magid and Millat as uncles and not her father, Irie's child rewrites history and patriarchal culture that gives men undue privilege over women. Also, not only does she write herself into subjectivity but also finds a voice to speak, to make decision, and to assess critically. In so doing, she opens a feminine space needed in the building a new British society where everyone is given equal opportunity to participate.

The rhizomatic womb-space these women create is a radical and hybrid one that takes into consideration the different routes and experiences that shape their identities as women. Not only do they question their silencing and displacement but also seek to create a relational multicultural British society as they break down old paradigms and structures that inhibit their self-development. As Anzaldúa notes "because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—*la mestiza* creates a new consciousness" (Anzaldúa 1999, 102). Like Anzaldúa, Smith situates the la mestiza consciousness in a hybrid and rhizomatic womb-space—a space of cross pollination of races, genes, cultures, and ideologies. For Smith, women can no longer be left behind in events that lead to nation building; the time is ripe for them to tell their stories. In telling their stories, women lay claim not on history, since they are marginal to it, but on routes to show "the antithetical ways [through which] they are displaced" and emplaced as well (Addante 2008, 76). Although they are displaced, they seek ways to recreate their identities as they create a sense of belonging for themselves in their new host environment and a voice to speak. Contrary to Tracey Walters' argument that, "Smith has difficulty creating female characters (both black and white) that are more than one-dimensional character type…[and that her female characters] lack development because they are overshadowed by white male protagonists'" (Walters 2008, 125), one notes that Smith portrays women who break their barriers to create new identities for themselves and for their children; even Irie's unborn child is not only radical but also an embodiment of a multi-dimensional character type as her identity cannot be easily pinned down. Significant is the fact that Smith pays particular attention to how women move from the margins to the center as they deconstruct history, reconstruct their identities, and contribute to building a stronger multicultural society for everyone irrespective of sex, gender, class, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Herein lies the strength of the future British society that Irie and other women nurture in her rhizomatic womb-spaces.

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