

WHITE TEETH

Zadie Smith

Analysis by Fausto Ciompi

Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) is a novel that explores multiculturalism, immigration, and identity in late 20th century London. Its reference to the 1907 Kingston earthquake in Jamaica points at historical continuity, inherited trauma and colonialism. Far from being a mere incidental or sensational detail, the earthquake anchors the intergenerational story of Hortense Bowden and her descendants, marking a moment where personal, colonial, and spiritual upheavals converge.

Year of Publication	2000
Publication Place	London
Editor	Hamish Hamilton
Entity	1907 Kingston Earthquake

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake 1907 Kingston Earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	14 January, 1907
Location	Kingston, Buff Bay, Annotto Bay: northern coast of Jamaica Jamaica
Coordinates	18.224945, -76.769817
Impacted Areas	Kingston, Jamaica
Seismic Fault	Gonâve microplate, Caribbean plate, Enriquillo–Plantain Garden. Walton fault
Magnitude	6.2 Richter magnitude
Typology	Tectonic EarthquakeTectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Cities
Ecological Impacts	Physical Landscape Changes

Deaths

"A century ago, the 14 January 1907 Kingston earthquake (MMI IX) killed 1000 and left 90 000 homeless in the capital city" (Mann, Demets, Wiggins-Grandison 245)

Destruction Of Public Buildings

"Sir Alfred Jones and many of his party had lunched at the Myrtle Bank Hotel on the seafront. They were slowly returning to that house when the ground beneath their feet began to quake and shudder, as if the earth itself were in agony. In a moment the hotel building collapsed. The sides fell out and the whole structure became as grotesque as Lord Dudley described it as a wrecked doll's house. Mr. Jesse Collins stumbled on the moving earth, but was quickly picked up by his nearest neighbor without harm. In a moment nothing could be seen for the blinding dust and smoke which began to arise" (Caine 1907)

Injuries

"As to the actual surgical work, it was nothing but setting fractures of every description, arresting hemorrhage by ligature and tourniquet, cleansing wounds and amputating limbs. Such severe injuries it has never been my lot before to witness, in spite of a lengthened experience in military surgery during the South African war. Some 200 cases passed through my hands, surrounded by leading representatives of the press and public men, much that is kind and appreciative as been written and said of our work on the Port Kingston. I hope I did my duty. I was glad to be there, and glad to be an Englishman, for we received on board that ship wounded and refugees of every colour, nationality and creed" (Evans 348)

Earthquake 1907 Kingston Earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1907
Location	Jamaica
Impacted Areas	Kingston
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Cities
Social Impacts	Destruction Of Public BuildingsDeathsTraumaDestruction Of Goods/CommoditiesDestruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	Ambrosia
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Jamaica
Nationality	Jamaican

Reactions	SurrenderPrayer
Name	Sir Glenard
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	English
Reactions	Immobility

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	EarthquakeKingstonJehovahGeneticsColonial PowersLegacy
Metaphors	"...the legendary Kingston earthquake, 1907, when everybody else was busy dying miracles ran in the family" (Smith 35) "Your mother was born in a bloody earthquake, for Christ's sake. 1907, Kingston's falling apart and Hortense pops into the world. You wouldn't see a little storm like this worrying her. Tough as nails, that one." (Smith 232) "It was Mohammed Hussein-Ishmael, the butcher" (475) "th"the rumble knocked the Bowden brain cells into place" (364)
Similes	"the events of 14 January 1907, the day of the terrible Jamaican earthquake, are not hidden from her, but bright and clear as a bell." (368) "1907, Kingston's falling apart and Hortense pops into the world. You wouldn't see a little storm like this worrying her. Tough as nails, that one." (232)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	ApocalypseDeathDeities
Syntax	Hypotaxis
Punctuation	Ellipsis
Morphology	Preference For Verbs Adverbs

Zadie Smith’s 2000 novel *White Teeth* explores the complexities of race, immigration, identity and history in late 20th-century London. The story centres on the intertwined lives of two unlikely friends: Archie Jones, a passive and indecisive Englishman; and Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi Muslim with a fierce sense of heritage and deep ambivalence about his place in the modern world. Their friendship, forged while serving together in the British army during World War II, forms the basis of the novel, with their lives remaining intertwined through the generations.

Archie is an ordinary man who marries Clara Bowden, a much younger Jamaican woman who was raised as a Jehovah's Witness. Their relationship is based more on chance and habit than romance, but they have a daughter, Irie, who grows up caught between cultures, races, and expectations. Samad, who is more ideological and aggrieved than Archie, marries Alsana and they have twin sons, Magid

and Millat. Struggling with the shame he feels about his ineffectual role in the war, Samad becomes obsessed with his family's honour, his Islamic beliefs, and what he sees as his children's assimilation into an increasingly godless British society.

This ideological tension becomes the driving force behind one of the novel's central plotlines. At the heart of Samad's personal crisis is the feeling that he is losing control of his family, his culture and his identity. In a desperate and ill-conceived attempt to preserve his heritage, he secretly sends one of his sons, Magid, to Bangladesh to be raised in what he imagines will be a more spiritually and morally upright environment. However, Magid returns years later as a secular, science-obsessed rationalist who is more British in manner and ideology than his twin brother Millat. Millat remains in London and becomes involved with a radical Islamic group called KEVIN. Millat, hot-headed and charismatic, simultaneously seeks belonging and rebellion, channelling his disaffection through religious extremism more out of identity confusion than true conviction.

Irie's parallel coming-of-age journey further reflects the theme of generational struggle and hybrid identity. Meanwhile, the smart and yearning-for-acceptance Irie wrestles with her own confusion about beauty, race and family legacy. Growing up in a household dominated by her zealous and unforgiving Jamaican Jehovah's Witness grandmother, Hortense, and her emotionally distant mother, Clara, Irie longs for direction and a clear sense of identity. Her unrequited love for Millat, her brief flirtation with radical Black politics and her eventual involvement with the family of Marcus Chalfen — a white Jewish-Catholic geneticist whose eugenics-adjacent research symbolises a new kind of scientific determinism — reflect her search for intellectual and emotional anchorage.

The Chalfens, in contrast to the immigrant families, offer a seemingly stable but ultimately problematic worldview. The Chalfens, particularly Marcus and his wife Joyce, embody a different kind of ideological certainty: liberal, self-congratulatory and oblivious to their own condescension. Marcus' work on FutureMouse™, a genetically engineered mouse designed to demonstrate human control over evolution, becomes the symbolic centre of the novel's final section. It is at the unveiling of this mouse that all the narrative threads converge: Millat plans a violent protest as part of KEVIN; Magid is present as a scientific collaborator; Irie is also caught up in the event; and Archie and Samad, older and wiser, observe their children acting out the complex legacy they have inherited.

This convergence reveals the novel's deeper argument about identity and history. The novel does not end with resolution, but with the suggestion that history, identity and destiny remain unresolved and in constant flux. *White Teeth* resists the neat binaries that often dominate discussions of multiculturalism, instead embracing the messiness of life in a postcolonial, postmodern city. It critiques the seductive allure of certainty, whether religious, scientific or nationalist, and suggests that identity is not fixed or pure, but hybrid, evolving and contested.

This idea is echoed in the novel's title, *White Teeth*, which hints at concerns with appearances, inheritance and legacy. Since tooth colour is genetically inherited and does not vary significantly across racial groups, white teeth can be seen as a symbol of equality and collective human identity. Teeth endure even after death, reminding us that the past persists in the present, sometimes grotesquely and sometimes comically. As a critic observes, in fact, the novel promotes a set of unsettling truths: "the inescapability of roots and history in human lives, the impact of biology and the body on our sense of self, and the violence intrinsic to human affairs" (Tancke par. 18).

These themes of inheritance and rupture are further explored through the novel's historical flashbacks. The novel's exploration of historical continuity and inherited trauma is emphasised through its recounting of the 1907 Kingston earthquake in Jamaica. The earthquake is a pivotal fact in the backstory of Hortense Bowden, Irie's grandmother, and a formative event in the Jamaican part of the narrative, a literal rupture that becomes a symbolic reference point for religious fervour, colonial displacement and psychological trauma. Hortense is born at the precise moment when Ambrosia Bowden, her mother, goes into labor during the quake. Hortense is born out of wedlock to a white Englishman (Captain Charlie Durham) and his Black Jamaican servant, Ambrosia Bowden. The relationship between Captain Durham, the colonial officer, and Ambrosia, the young Jamaican woman he impregnates, is a classic example of exploitative colonial power dynamics. This relationship serves as a crucial backstory for the Jones/Bowden family line.

Their connection to the 1907 Kingston earthquake is deeply symbolic. In his essay "Hysterical Realism," James Wood criticizes the presence of overtly improbable elements in contemporary fiction, citing the example of a woman born during an earthquake in Kingston, Jamaica in *White Teeth*. Wood concedes that such a birth is not physically impossible, as "obviously one could be born in an earthquake" [Robbins 313], but he characterizes such narrative choices as inhuman or paranoid. (Wood <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/culture/56397/hysterical-realism>) This hyperbolic style is characteristic of contemporary fiction, which includes a character born at the exact moment that the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Wood's core objection to hysterical realism is to what he perceives as a facile method of imbuing characters with world-historical significance they otherwise lack. He argues that building a novel's architecture around cults and cloned mice and Jamaican earthquakes demonstrates a lack of moral seriousness.

However, this critique is not universally accepted. Robbins (among others) contends that this point might be inverted and suggests that *White Teeth* achieves a profound "moral seriousness" (Robbins 313) precisely by addressing the contemporary imperative for global connection. In an era where even seemingly isolated lives are shaped by global interdependencies, Smith's fictional earthquake serves a similar function to Adam Smith's real-world one: both act as metaphors for "objective social relations" (313). These social forces, being inherently global, are too vast and unwieldy to be fully internalized or "lived out in the experience of the characters" [313]. Therefore, the "inhuman" quality of the novelistic earthquake is not a flaw, but rather a reflection of these overwhelming societal forces that defy easy individual comprehension or responsibility.

Two of such forces are race and religion. Raised with strict religious ideals, Hortense becomes deeply committed to the apocalyptic teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The violent, terrifying and indiscriminate earthquake that hits when she is born confirms in Hortense's eyes the wrath and might of Jehovah and the imminence of Armageddon. This leaves her with a sharpened, almost fanatical worldview: the sense that history moves towards inevitable divine retribution and that human life must be lived in constant anticipation of judgement.

This worldview is reinforced in a later episode that further illustrates the breakdown of colonial authority. The episode centers on Captain Durham's return to Kingston following the earthquake. He finds himself amidst unfamiliar faces, and some Americans have disembarked without his authorization. Durham's inability to provide assistance during the earthquake, coupled with his current powerlessness despite representing colonial authority, underscores his diminished stature. He is rendered incapable of aiding either Ambrosia or the other individuals. This situation leaves him with a profound sense of being dispossessed of property and authority. Further symbolizing the waning of colonial authority is the displacement and rotation of Queen Victoria's statue upon its pedestal. She has turned her back on Jamaicans when they most needed her support: "the only other white figure is the statue of Victoria, five aftershocks having turned her round by degrees until she appears to have her back to the people. This is not far from the truth. It is the Americans, not the British, who have the resources to pledge serious aid, three warships full of provisions presently snaking down the coast from Cuba." (370).

This symbolic turning away speaks to the novel's larger redefinition of history. As critic Ryan Trimm remarks: "in the novel, major historic events in the traditional vein (the Indian Mutiny, the 1907 Jamaica earthquake, World War II) are subjected to what it calls 'root canals': their roots are subject to extraction and replacement. In place of the heroic architecture and statuary customarily associated with major historic occurrences, *White Teeth*'s memorial to migration is quotidian: names, faces, people themselves" (Trimm 153). The Jamaican segment of the novel offers vital context for understanding the intergenerational conflicts and inherited traumas in the Bowden family. Hortense's life is shaped by colonialism (her mixed heritage), religious fundamentalism, and unacknowledged sexual trauma. These elements influence how she raises Clara and how Clara, in turn, raises Irie—each woman struggling with identity, autonomy, and the burden of history. The earthquake in Jamaica is a pivotal moment in Hortense's story. It is interpreted by her as a sign of the end times, confirming her religious beliefs. This apocalyptic event not only reinforces her spiritual zeal but also serves as a metaphor for the rupture and instability in her life—personal, familial, and national. The earthquake contributes to her decision to leave Jamaica and seek a new life in England, bringing her deep religiosity and trauma with her.

This past haunts the present in subtle ways. Hortense emigrates to Britain with her spiritual wounds intact, and she raises Clara—herself a product of colonial entanglement between a white British man and a Black Jamaican woman—with a rigid, joyless moral code. Clara, in turn, largely abandons this religious legacy, but the silence around trauma, shame, and identity continues into Irie's generation. The earthquake, while geographically and temporally distant from the main action in London, reverberates across the novel's generational arcs. It becomes a symbol of inherited trauma and the inability to fully escape the gravitational pull of one's cultural and historical origins. As Smith puts it elsewhere: "[...] And likewise the characters in the book are [traumatized]. That whole kind of 60s, 70s, liberation ethic that you will be released by knowing your roots, that you will discover yourself. I just always thought was a crock basically, and it's partly true, but your roots come with baggage. And the baggage isn't always fun" (O'Grady 106).

This notion is reinforced by a clever metaphor in the novel's structure. As critic John Clement Ball aptly puts it, "By naming her flashback chapters 'Root Canals', [Smith] hints at the roots/routes duality of migrancy, since outside of dentistry a canal is a route; it is, notably an inland waterway, a local route; Smith also links routes to oceanic, global routes when she extends Samad's belief that tradition was culture, and culture led to routes, and these were good" (Ball 242).

In the end, *White Teeth* is a novel about convergence—of cultures, religions, ideologies, and histories—and about the tension between determinism and free will. The Kingston earthquake is one among many of the novel's "fault lines," both literal and figurative, that remind the reader of the fragility of the ground beneath each character's feet. Whether in London or Jamaica, the past is never really buried—it rumbles beneath the surface, threatening to erupt.

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