

**Stereotyping the Migrant as the 'Other': An Examination of
Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane***

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Abstract

In the migrant-native interface that forms the context of the narrative of diaspora novels, how is the migrant represented? The diaspora writer having been a migrant himself, do personal experiences spill into his writing or does the writer have a specific design in representing the migrant? Is there a pattern to the migrant-representation in 'White Teeth' and 'Brick Lane'? What could have driven this pattern, if there is one? Is the pattern akin to stereotyping? This paper finds answers to these questions – which could lead to conclusions about the representation of the migrant in diaspora writing.

Keywords: Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, Stereotyping, Othering, Migrant, Diaspora, Orient, Occident

The vindication of the project of colonization relied on depictions of the colonized as inferior, uncivilized and needing reform. Colonial discourse propagated views which created and established the coloniser-colonised binary and its parallels in the East-West and orient-occident dyads. The coloniser-colonised binary rested on a superior-inferior hierarchy, to maintain which stereotyping the colonized and, thereby, Othering them was a prerequisite.

The dictionary explains ‘stereotype’ as “a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing”. Stereotypes are resistant to change. A certain power dynamic operates in stereotyping where the dominant group establishes stereotypes of the passive through the act of repetition and indoctrination. Stereotypes are repeated to maintain their stability, and to prevent the loss of their power and validity as signs. Colonial discourse that fixes the binary between the colonizer, and the colonized produces stereotypical images of the colonized – by which he is ‘othered’. Homi K. Bhabha who proposes the postcolonial concept of stereotyping says “it is a form of multiple and contradictory beliefs in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it” (Bhabha, 1994). The power that fixes the identities of the coloniser and the colonised as opposed entities, depends on stereotypical images of the other – for the image of the ‘uncivilized colonial subject’ reinforces the ‘civilized-coloniser’ construct. Othering might be seen as an extension of stereotyping. ‘Othering’ is a term coined by Gayatri Spivak which describes the process by which imperial discourse creates its Others ([Key Concepts, 156](#)). The ‘Other’ is constructed, through discourse, as different from oneself for strategic and political reasons. The coloniser constructs the colonized as his ‘other’. Othering can be exotic or demonic. Exotic othering relies on constructs of the colonized as beautiful in their primitive state - untouched by civilisation. And demonic othering emphasises the image of the colonized as barbaric and uncivilized.

In the postcolonial context, and in the multiracial, multicultural scenario of the metropolitan cities of former colonial masters like Britain, the migrant-native interface is often characterised by stereotyping and othering. Through stereotypes created of the migrant, he is othered and seen as different from the native. How do diaspora writers, migrants themselves, portray the migrant? Do they, in their writings, other the migrant and construct stereotypes of them? Zadie Smith’s ‘White Teeth’ and Monica Ali’s ‘Brick Lane’ seem to answer the question in the affirmative. What could have inspired such a construct of the migrant? An examination of ‘White Teeth’ and ‘Brick Lane’ made here, attempts to answer this.

‘White Teeth’ with its multiracial cast, is populated with migrants from Bangladesh and Jamaica. And ‘Brick Lane’ has Bangladeshi immigrants predominantly in its cast. The other characters being English, the scope for bringing the migrant and the native in interface has been facilitated. There seems no dearth of migrant-characters who reflect many traits that do not inspire admiration from readers.

The principal characters of the two works Samad and Chanu respectively have been described as loud and aggressive whose boastful talk and belittling of others is resented by other characters. While Samad’s excited talk gets responses such as ‘[shifting, scratching, leg-crossing, coat-repositioning](#)’ (Smith, 129), Chanu is described as ‘speaking to the gallery’. Their excessive

obsession with roots and ancestry causes them difficulties in assimilation. Their high-sounding plans are brought to failure. They are shown as people who lack self-esteem and are eager to gain the appreciation of people around them – yet repel people through their unpolished social skills and attitude. While protagonists usually inspire awe through their heroic deeds, Samad and Chanu sometimes elicit ridicule and at other times pity. The protagonist is often representative of a type and his characterization lends the type, which he represents, to comprehension and empathy. But Samad and Chanu’s characterization would cause ‘the migrant’ that they represent to seem uninspiring. The role of fools or jests seems to be taken up by them. They seem to have been used to provide for the role of fools or jesters.

Then, there are the impulsive Millat of ‘White Teeth’ and Karim of ‘Brick Lane’ – who apparently have been created only to represent impulsiveness in the migrant. Millat is a confused 2nd generation migrant who, in the attempt to please parents and peer and to assert himself, becomes the leader of a radical group. Karim, who seemingly ‘knew his place in the world’, was proved wrong when the writer sent him into oblivion at the end of the novel. Millat and Karim were both leaders of religious fundamentalist groups, the activities of which have been shown to be lacking direction and purpose which ultimately disintegrates having caused anarchy. The migrant is thus proven as impulsive – who, in an impulsive act, has reached the host country chasing dreams of a ‘better life’ and has eventually lost his sense of purpose, is left disillusioned and frustrated.

Hortense Bowden of ‘White Teeth’ is a fanatic Jehovah Witness. Samad and Nazneen are religious and therefore wallow in guilt after their respective extramarital affairs. Samad, Irie, Nazneen, Hasina and Karim, through their immoral escapades, prove the migrant from the orient to be of easy virtue.

Samad and Chanu are men of no plans. Even if with plans, the plans are not followed by action. And Darcus Bowden is afflicted with an incurable fatigue that leaves him before the television all day long. Such lazy and passive migrants are surely a drain on the economy. They are shown unhappy in their jobs, relentlessly job-shifting or at best – jobless. They irk people around them with such idling and duly compensate idling with bragging. It is not hard to imagine that the reader would not gain an impressive image of the migrant.

Chanu and Samad are husbands who dominate their wives and curtail their freedom. Chanu prevents his wife from going out of the apartment or from learning English. Samad is used to wife-beating and cursing that gets promptly returned by his wife – episodes which are found hilarious by even their children. The ego of these male chauvinists is crashed to the ground

with their women's emancipation that has strengthened them to break free from the shackles of their husband's domination.

The migrant 'recreates little villages' even in Britain, and lives in shabby conditions. The bins overflow, the walls have indecent sketches, the lane is strewn with litter. The houses are cluttered with more furniture than one would need – with the migrant's reluctance to part with the old and the past.

What might have been the impelling force behind the creation of these novels? When both novels have similar characters in similar roles, committing similar stupidities, impulsiveness and immoralities – it is easy to draw that migrants are all similar. Migrants – be they from Bangladesh or Jamaica – are similar and have thus been homogenized. These migrants form stock characters. The narratives of these novels follow a similar pattern – immigrant arrives in host country chasing dreams of a better life – finds difficulties assimilating – recreates native villages – isolates himself perceiving racism – finds succor in religious fanaticism or extramarital affairs – brags about his own ability and about his legacy – yet does not accomplish much – becomes member of a fundamentalist group - fades into oblivion – or returns frustrated – finally the illusion of 'home' is destroyed. And most importantly, many women like Nazneen, Razia and Alsana, who came from superstitious backgrounds that had bound them to destiny and patriarchy-driven male domination – are emancipated and empowered in ways that their men could not be. The women assimilate and emerge successful.

The migrant is created aggressive, arrogant, impulsive, stupid, immoral, lazy and ridiculous – resembles 'the parade of the seven deadly sins'! Thus the Orient has been Othered (with the writer taking the coloniser's stance), especially through the return of the migrant who could not assimilate. When the migrant is othered, stereotyping is affected. With stereotypes of the lazy, impulsive, fanatic and immoral migrant entering two of these narratives scripted by diaspora writers – there is more to the story. The writers' status, of having been immigrants themselves with roots in the Orient, enables them to create the migrant's story. And when this migrant-story is written in the First World, mostly for the First World audience – the migrant-story passes off for the truth. How much truth is there to this story or could it have another version? The question might find answers in stories about immigrant-populated parts of Britain, as narrated in articles such as Sanchitha Islam's, on Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (London Fictions).

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and Helen Tiffin

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