

THE USES AND LIMITATIONS OF HUMOUR
IN POSTCOLONIAL IMMIGRANT LITERATURE:
THE MIMIC MEN, ADMIRING SILENCE AND WHITE TEETH

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Thesis Abstract

Gökçe Kuruçay, “The Uses and Limitations of Humour in Postcolonial

Immigrant Literature: *The Mimic Men*, *Admiring Silence* and *White Teeth*”

This study aims to analyze the employment of humour as a tool of resistance and protection in the cross-cultural encounters by the postcolonial immigrants of the metropolis. Subversive humour, which has proven to be a strategy of social protest since the Classical Ages, takes the distinct quality of being counter-discursive in postcolonial immigrant fiction. The comparison of the primary sources, *The Mimic Men*, by Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, *Admiring Silence* by Abdulrazak Gurnah and *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith posit humour as an alternative mode of destabilizing the established binary between the colonizer and the colonized. Parallel to the current postcolonial tendency of “writing back” at the center of power to reclaim the agency of the ex-colonized, *postcolonial humour* attempts to “laugh back” at the metropolitan center to criticize their self-legitimizing codes of colonial dominion. Through their humorous criticism, all the three novels question history and ancestry as pillar of cultural identity and denounce these sources of inequality with their humorous approach. In the course of this study, Stewart Hall’s notion of cultural identity and Hayden White’s narrative theory set the cultural and narrative frame of humour employed in *The Mimic Men*, *Admiring Silence* and *White Teeth*.

Tez Özeti

Gökçe Kuruçay, “Sömürgecilik Sonrası Göç Edebiyatında Mizah

Kullanımı ve Sınırlılıkları: *Taklitçiler*, *Sessizliğe Tapmak* ve *İnci Gibi Dişler*”

Bu çalışma, sömürgecilik sonrası dönemde büyük şehirlere göç eden karakterlerin kültürler arası karşılaşmalarda kendilerini koruma ve direnme amacıyla mizah kullanımlarını incelemeyi amaçlar. Klasik çağlardan beri sosyal protesto için önemli bir strateji olan yıkıcı mizah, sömürgecilik sonrası göç romanında karşı-söylemsel bir nitelik edinir. Birincil kaynaklar olan Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul tarafından yazılmış *Taklitçiler*, Abdulrazak Gurnah tarafından yazılmış *Sessizliğe Tapmak* ve Zadie Smith tarafından yazılmış *İnci Gibi Dişler* mizah kullanımını sömüren ve sömürülen arasında önceden yerleşmiş ikili karşıtlığı bozmak ve belirsizleştirmek için kullanılan alternatif bir strateji olarak önerir. Sömürgecilik sonrası edebiyatın eğilimi olan sömürgeci gücün merkezine kaybolmuş seslerini geri kazanmak için “geri yazma” stratejisi, sömürgecilik sonrası mizah söz konusu olduğunda kendini “geri gülme” olarak gösterir. Sömürgeciliğin merkezine “geri gülen” karakterler, bu stratejiyle sömürgeciliğin kendini haklı çıkaran kurallarını eleştirmeyi amaçlar. Gülen eleştirileri aracılığıyla bu üç roman geçmişin ve soyun kültürel kimliğin temeli olmasını sorgular ve bu ikisini ırklar arası eşitsizliğin temeli olmasından ötürü mizahlı bir yaklaşımla eleştirir. Bu inceleme boyunca Stewart Hall’un kültürel kimlik hakkındaki kavramları ve Hayden White’in yazınsal teorisi *Taklitçiler*, *Sessizliğe Tapmak* ve *İnci Gibi Dişler*’deki mizah kullanımını kültürel ve yazınsal açılarından çerçeveleyecektir.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“True revolution is not found in the violence of detail or excess of language,
but in the profound conversion of will refusing the traditional order.”
Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'Ironie*

Most of the postcolonial literary production in the last decades has dealt with the tragedies that the colonial situation entails, but little has been written on postcolonial humour.

Considering the concrete historical reality of the colonial condition, this is an intuitive conclusion: the tragedies of colonialism abound while there is little humour in the colonial situation, if any. The number of colonial tragedies must always outnumber those of comedy, for postcolonial literature is produced by “the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression”, based on cultural dominance and economic agendas on behalf of the colonizer (*Empire*, Ashcroft et al. 2). Another reason for the paucity of postcolonial humour is due to its dependence on its own tragedy. After all, tragedy and comedy are the same in that they deal with the contradictions of life, but differ in the perspective from which they view it. This study will aim to look at the comic elements in three postcolonial immigrant novels and attempt to analyze the various forms of the subcategory called *postcolonial humour*.

Humour has been one of the founding elements of literature, and more often than not, it has served strategic purposes. Very broadly speaking, due to its ambiguous nature, humour can be used to veil and unveil thoughts simultaneously, and one joke can make one feel superior while the same joke causes inferiority in the other. Humour is mostly relational: it works with doubles and operates within gaps between the pairs: the performer and the audience, the one who is made fun of and the one who makes fun. Just like humour, the nature

of postcolonialism is also essentially relational: it always operates on the gaps and dynamic relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Consequently, both postcolonialism and humour share founding principles: they respond, subvert and sometimes humiliate, but the question is who the laughter turns towards at the end. In this context, is humour a means of protection and accommodation, thus affirming the subordinate role of the colonized immigrant in postcolonial power relations *or* does the empire really manage to “laugh back” by destabilizing the power of the center? In this thesis my main frame will be postcolonial literature, and more precisely I will examine the modes of humorous resistance in the context of novels written by postcolonial subjects who have moved to the metropolis and portray humour as a valid textual strategy for laughing back in their narratives.

Postcolonial societies are still subject to forms of cultural and neo-colonial domination and postcolonial discourse still tries to address complex problems of representation, race, gender, transculturality and agency (*Reader*, Ashcroft et al. 1-2), even after many years of independence. The postcolonial writer, as a member of the colonized past, has to write the alternative and unofficial side of colonial history as a mark of his inherent otherness and to dismantle the processes that caused this alterity in the first place. The need for distinct ways of self-representation manifests itself even more acutely in the case of the postcolonial immigrant because of his ambiguous stance between his initial and inherited cultures. Thanks to the partial dissemination of the center-margin dynamics, the growing awareness of the inauthenticity of identity and increasing textual –and more significantly–cultural resistance, the postcolonial subject is now more confident in questioning and critiquing the colonial structures.

Before proceeding further, we must return to the subcategory of postcolonial immigrant literature and find out what makes it a coherent unit in order to study the element of humour employed within the works. To begin with, the theme of “place versus displacement” has

been one of the features of the current postcolonial literatures. As Richard Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin also remark in *The Empire Writes Back*, “place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all post-colonial literatures in English” (9). From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the world has witnessed huge demographic shifts due to various factors such as economic difficulties, famine and search for new opportunities. These shifts have added new tags with negative connotations to the formerly colonized subjects: ‘home-less’, ‘dis-located’, ‘root-less’ or ‘de-territorialized’, to name only a few of a huge group of words with negative prefixes or suffixes. The essential predicament of the postcolonial immigrant in his diasporic world has caused him to perpetuate a necessary sense of unbelonging, which is neither “belonging” nor “not belonging”, but a stance at the nexus of both, “the perillous territory” of unbelonging, in which “humanity loiters as refugees and displaced persons” (Said 177). The displaced subject needs a new mode of representation, other than the one historically appropriated by the colonizer, to illuminate the “other” side of the/(his)story and to find a means of resistance in cross-cultural encounters. So far, the dominant discourse has proven arduous to dismantle completely, but it has also provided the (ex)colonized with tools to work his way through, “adopting and adapting” the colonial discourse in accordance with their own needs, which is at best a detour before he can finally reach unique means of self-representation, and at worst, an endless dialectic from which he can never totally escape.

Regardless of their various strategies to cope with marginality and search for agency, the immigrant subjects¹ face daily problems of definition as a natural result of living in another culture, getting used to maintaining a fragile balance on precarious grounds as Salman Rushdie points out in *Imaginary Homelands* (17). Apart from suffering from quotidian ontological questions, the deterritorialized postcolonial subject fears rejection while being –

¹ Said divides this group to four: exiles, émigrés, refugees, expatriates (181).

overtly or covertly-forced to condone assimilation. However, this is only the first stage of exclusion, because soon enough the immigrant starts to develop a sense of alienation to his biological home, often by reconstituting his identity through siding along with the triumphant ideology (Said 177), which does not necessarily let him in since for the colonizer identity can not be adopted, not even adapted.

Stuart Hall claims in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” that there are two basic notions of cultural identity, the first of which is defined through an imaginative rediscovery of the essence of a shared history and ancestry, while the second is analyzed through the concepts of hybridity and constant transformation. Hall asserts that the second view ruptures the oneness and fixity of the first notion and that it is only possible to “undersand the traumatic experience of ‘the colonial experience’ through this position, which favours ‘becoming’ over ‘being’ (222-224). In the novels I chose for this study, the metropolitan subject defines identity “via biological factors and natural essences and confines representation to a normative range” (Rajan 79), which can be broadly categorized as the first notion of cultural identity in Hall’s framework. This fundamentalist notion of identity adopted by the colonizer, is why most of the immigrant literature deals with the clash of “identity as essentialism” versus “identity as construction”². The questions of what identity is and the complex ways in which it is fabricated are beyond the analysis and scope of this study, but the notion will be discussed in relation to the theme of displacement. What concerns us here is the relation between (un)belonging and how comic elements are employed to denounce the fundamentalist notions of identity. Without saying much, humour points at exclusion and *xenophobia* as the pillars of cross-cultural encounters and through humorous exposure criticizes the fossilized cultural practices, offering a more holistic trans-cultural solution. Humour as a tool, working in and

² It would be a simplistic generalization to claim that all the postcolonial literatures side with the “constructed” qualities of identity but the immigrant space is more prone to occupy the unstable zone of belonging, amalgamating the two mutually exclusive views.

through cultural dialectic relationships offers new definitions and perspectives about the problem of cultural identity.

The Relationship between Humour and the Postcolonial

Although comedy as a genre has been employed from the Classical Ages onwards, it has been difficult to formulate a single, comprehensive theory of laughter and humorous wit. The multiplicity of theories of humour show that what makes us laugh is difficult to conceptualize. There are three main theories but none is still found sufficient to describe the primordial causes of laughter. Superiority Theory, the oldest among all theories of humour, is constructed on the notion that laughter is always necessarily directed at someone and with an element of scorn – Aristotle even called it “educated insolence”. According to this theory, “we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people, or over our own former position” (Morreall 3-5). Relief Theory takes a psychological aspect and postulates that humour is a means of releasing the excessive nervous energy, “which builds up within our bodies and requires release through muscular movement” (Morreall 99). As a follower of this theory, Freud claims that jokes are safety valves for dangerous and forbidden thoughts, feelings and urges since they release the superfluous energy through our being able to joke about them. By joking the person expresses the energy which he would otherwise use for repressing “hostile or sexual feelings and thoughts” (Morreall 116). Moreover, Freud remarks that the humorist acquires the superiority of the father by “assuming the role of the grown up”, and automatically the rest are reduced to the position of children (Morreall 114). The newest of all theories of humour is the Incongruity Theory which asserts that humour arises out of a clash between the thoughts and perception in a given situation. According to this theory, we laugh at something when there is an object or thought that clashes with our expectations in that set of circumstances (Morreall 6). This study does not aim to look at the postcolonial novels from any single one of the theories mentioned above, however, references to them will be made

back and forth because they all side with promotion of agency and imply a sort of intentionality while commenting on power relationships.

As we said earlier, the current theories of humour fall short in explaining the totality of human laughter. Humour needs to be juxtaposed with social and cultural practices to be understood in its subversive ways of sense making. In this context, the diverse practices of humour and postcolonialism have to join forces to found a mutual solid ground on which postcolonial humour will stand and laugh back. Although postcolonialism has a much shorter history than humour, it has proven to be *as* complex and as difficult to theorize.

Postcolonialism can mean both ‘after-colonialism’ and ‘after-independence’ (*Empire*, Ashcroft et al. 1), among a myriad of other definitions. Rather than a definition, it marks both an ongoing process and a historical viewpoint from which the subjects can talk about the previous and current social and political conditions. At best, both humour and postcolonialism defy homogenization and are used to cover various cultural practices with many sub-categories. As Reichl and Stein also say: “Both laughter and the postcolonial, are umbrella terms, both cover phenomena that derive from a confluence of specific socio-cultural situations and a repertory of widely applicable strategies and techniques” (8). This heterogeneity is of utmost importance, and owing to it, this thesis will deal with different types of humour as displayed in the works of three writers from distinct backgrounds, with colonial history as their common ground.

Having established this connection between the theories of humour and the postcolonial, we can now examine the common features that makes humour a convenient device for the postcolonial immigrant. To begin with, the attitude of “writing back” to the center of dominion in postcolonial literature directly translates itself to “laughing back” in postcolonial

humour³ (Reichl et al. 9). Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffiths explain in *The Empire Writes Back* that the new trend in postcolonial literature is to write back to the center of dominion to unveil their oppressed past and claim their lost agency. However, they also assert that postcolonial literature reiterates –by rereading and rewriting the European historical record–the colonial power because it uses the same tools to talk about its own agony and (potential) power. Nowadays postcolonial literature deals with the “dismantling of the European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses”, working in and through the colonizer’s discourse (Ashcroft et al. 195). Subversion and appropriation here might imply constant dialogue with the discourse that postcolonial literature aims to dismantle; nonetheless, they are forms of resistance with which postcolonial literatures become the new foci of attention, blurring the boundary between the metropolitan center and colonial periphery. Moreover, they claim that rereading and rewriting, “rather than the construction of essentially national or regional alternatives, are the characteristics of the post-colonial text. Post-colonial literatures/cultures are constituted in counter-discursive rather than homologous practices” (196). In short, they assert that although postcolonial literature scrutinizes and criticizes the codes of the colonial dominion, it is still in constant dialogue with the Empire rather than being self-referential.

This marks one of the dilemmas of postcolonial literature: it is mostly stuck in the binary relationship between the metropolitan center and the colonial periphery, no matter how much it laughs or writes back. In his book on the use of satire in postcolonial novels *Satire & The Postcolonial Novel*, John Clement Ball discusses the intrinsic relationship between satire and the postcolonial condition through the terms of “referentiality” and “oppositonality”. He makes his analysis only in the specific branch of satire but I think his findings are applicable

³ The term “postcolonial humour” does not connote a specific type of humour that exclusively results from postcolonial cultural and social practices. In the scope of this study “postcolonial humour” is used to comprise all elements of laughter in postcolonial contexts in general.

to postcolonial humour in the frame of this thesis. Ball asserts that satire has a “definite object of attack”, and so does the counter-discursive postcolonial literature. He remarks: “[Beyond satire] is a targeted victim—a person, institution, or practice – with at least some degree of historicity” (2), and that this puts the subject and object of attack in a mutual interaction, by which he concludes that there is *referentiality* between those who mock and those who are mocked. He goes on to argue that postcolonial literature makes constant use of dialectical relationship of the two colonial sides by *referentiality*, which is “related to the concepts of agency, materiality and historicity, through which specific local or national contexts and subjects for writing are privileged” (2). On the other hand he notes that *oppositonality* is articulated as “resistance, subversion, counter-discourse, contestatory narrative, writing back, and critique” to the center of dominion (2), which is the main aim of both satire and the counter-hegemonic postcolonial production. The characteristics of *oppositonality* and *referentiality* will be pertinent to my discussion of humour’s relation to postcolonialism because they denote the simultaneous concord and discord of the postcolonial condition, the ambiguous stance. Postcolonial literature is oppositional in that it seeks to see beyond the hierarchical master/slave dialectic but referential in that it uses the same tools as the dominant, homogenizing, unifying discourse to talk about itself.

At this point, it should be made clear that the term “postcolonial humour” does not connote “funny” *per se*, but attempts to give agency to the voice of the oppressed. To make it clear, not all humour targets or means to insult someone (we might laugh at someone who falls down involuntarily) but in the scope of this thesis, one of the keystone features of humour will be its *intentionality*. It is a word derived from Latin *intentio*, which means “being directed to a goal or a thing” as well as “constituting tension”. It represents or stands for things, properties and states of affairs⁴. Postcolonial humour is necessarily intentional, because it’s always self-

⁴ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

consciously employed, and has a pre-meditated target in mind (Rice 5). However, that is not humour's only function; apart from marking the hierarchical imbalances, laughing might also reinscribe and reinforce the unequal power dynamics by releasing some tension of the marginalized, which reaffirms the central position of the colonizer. Moreover, the target of laughter might not only be the colonizer but also the colonized themselves, for they might make fun of their own helplessness in the face of adversity (Reichl et al. 12). Laughter can make fun of the colonizer through the colonized by self-deprecating or stereotyping, strategies frequently employed by V.S. Naipaul and Abdulrazak Gurnah. To sum up, postcolonial humour can 'laugh back', 'laugh through', 'laugh at' or 'laugh with', but it necessarily makes use of *intentionality* in any of these productions.

So far, we have discussed three qualities of postcolonial humour: *oppositonality*, *referentiality* and *intentionality*. Yet, one more trait remains to be highlighted, and it is *slippage*, by which we mean the ambivalence between the obvious surface meaning and a submerged agenda, which aims to destabilize by working with and through stereotypes (Rice 7). This slippage only partially resembles that of Homi Bhabha⁵ in that they both address the in-betweenness of the postcolonial subject, but in this context it is way more simplistic than Bhabha's ambivalence of *not quite, not white*. It simply points to the gap between the said and unsaid, and the difference of intentions between the two. This slippage serves as a negotiator of space and identity for the postcolonial subject for the dual nature of slippage resists closure, and attempts to open up a space for redefinitions for the postcolonial immigrant. In this study, humorous resistance will be examined through these four traits.

⁵ In his essay "Of Mimicry and Man", Homi Bhabha discusses the term "slippage" both as a mark of colonial ambivalence (almost the same, *but not quite*) and as a tool that reduces and fixes the presence of the colonized to incomplete and partial in face of the colonizer, implying only a metonymy of the whole colonial presence. Through this duality, Bhabha implies both rupture and continuity of the authoritative discourse (122-123).

The concept of humour might not be a trademark of postcolonial literature but the dual essence of the postcolonial immigrant's condition marks humour as a strategic tool of subversion. In general smiling criticism is "more difficult to refute by 'rational' arguments. Authority and power can melt, as the invitation to laugh *with* one another appeal to all-human feelings and breaks down 'official' barriers" (Hart 8). That is to say, what cannot be said easily is disguised in grotesque exaggerations, silent asides, intentional mimicry and subversive stereotyping: criticisms *easy* to realize but hard to pinpoint. As Laura Rice also discusses in her book, *Of Irony and Empire*, the transformative powers of irony in Muslim African cultures "[irony] is affirmation through denial. Through mockery, it unmasks petty error and encourages analysis of the scheme of things. Yet through paradox and reconciliation, irony at its best affirms by opening our structuring of the world to transformation" (4). This is the double nature of implication, wandering in the grey area of assertion/denial, overt/covert, unison/exclusion that the inside/outsider employs in his encounters with the "other".

Speaking of its dual nature, postcolonialism's affinity to postmodernism also makes it an eligible ground for postcolonial humour to dwell on. Both theories, built to criticize and question the products of the Enlightenment, are preoccupied with "the provisional and fragmentary aspects of signification" and the "collapse of imperialistic explanations of the world", endeavor to demonstrate the fragility of 'grand narratives' (Boehemer 237). Moreover, postcolonialism's interest in seeing beyond the process of colonial production rather than the production itself opens up a dual discourse, which is a fruitful ground for humour to destabilize the normative Western colonialist discourse. As Elleke Boehemer also comments, postcolonial and postmodern cross paths in their concern with marginality, ambiguity, disintegrating binaries, all things parodied, piebald, dual, mimicked, always-

already borrowed, and ironically second hand, aiming to make fun of a an original work by means of satiric or ironic imitation (237-238).

As I have tried to clarify, resistance -one of the characteristics of today's postcolonial literature -can take multifarious forms and humour is only one of them, and even humour in itself has divergences. We can claim that postcolonial humour has at least two functions: the first is to laugh at a situation that the ex-colonized subjects are unable to change and the second is to destabilize the central power through the criticism of subversive laughter. In this manner both are valid textual strategies, employed by the postcolonial writer. However, postcolonial humour as textual resistance can not change anything by itself, neither can it undo the reasons for its point of departure and this is why this thesis will rather be descriptive than definitive. Nonetheless, humour's functional variety and natural resemblance to postcolonialism marks it as an interesting narrative strategy to attempt self-representation.

In this study I chose to work with three postcolonial novels which can be loosely united under the theme of immigration. However, apart from the similarity of their subject matter, their inclusion of different kinds of humour in their narrative styles posits them as coherent representatives of postcolonial humour. I will work with V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, to scrutinize the relationship between the postcolonial immigrants and their need for humour in their trials concerning their belonging to their "inherited homes" and "imaginary homelands". In Chapter II, intentional mimicry and Bakhtin's carnival ambivalence will be addressed in *The Mimic Men*, written by the Trinidad born Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul. In Chapter III humour will translate itself to bitter irony and silent sarcasm in *Admiring Silence*, written by the Tanzanian writer Abdulrazak Gurnah while in Chapter IV light-hearted mockery in *White Teeth*, by the English-Jamaican Zadie Smith will be dealt with. Chapter V will rephrase the questions of the

humour's relevance to postcolonialism and answer to what extent postcolonial humour is an adequate tool for postcolonial resistance.

After all, humour does not only “teach” and “delight” as Horace says, but also “subverts” and “criticizes”. In the works of these three authors from different postcolonial backgrounds, whose characters make up the different layers of diaspora in the colonial capital London, I aim to find traces of humour that criticizes through subversion. My method throughout this study will be to examine each novel in its specific context, with references to the biographies of their authors, who are either from or have close ties with the colonies of British invasion.

CHAPTER 2

MIND THE GAP: SUBVERSIVE MIMICRY IN

THE MIMIC MEN

“We were a colony, a benevolently administered dependency.
So long as our dependence remained unquestioned
our politics were a joke.”
V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men*

The Mimic Men, one of the earlier writings of the controversial Trinidadian-British Nobel Laureate Vidiadhar Surjaprasad Naipaul, is a retrospective account of the 40 year-old colonial minister on his chosen exile in London and on his memories of the imaginary island of Isabella. In the novel, through the cultural and spiritual displacement of the colonial politician Ralph Singh, V.S. Naipaul examines the problems and limitations of the identity issues of the colonized subjects in the postcolonial world of 50s, an era marked by rapid decolonization and independence. Naipaul’s writing has been profoundly affected by his cultural background, and it is easy to trace some features of Ralph Singh in Naipaul himself in *The Mimic Men*. Since the novel contains autobiographical elements from the author’s life, a brief elucidation on Naipaul’s biography will guide us for a better contextualization of his use of intentional mimicry and employment of humour in the novel.

Born of Indian origin in Trinidad Tobago in 1932, Naipaul’s prolific literary years coincide with his country’s independence and development of social consciousness, a process which has deeply affected his writing (Cudjoe par 1). At the time of the author’s birth, Trinidad was

a British colony and remained so until 1962, before the time Naipaul moved to Britain by getting a generous scholarship to study in Oxford University in 1950. Here he suffered from mental breakdowns caused by “loneliness and homesickness”⁶ (Dooley 2). Despite travelling extensively around the world, Naipaul never returned to Trinidad and has resided in London, where he was knighted by the British government in 1990 (Dooley 2).

At the beginning of his non-fictional book on how he became an author, *Reading and Writing*, Naipaul openly admits that he had wished to be a writer since the age of eleven. However, a few pages later he twists it with an ironic self-realization that he was not particularly gifted at writing⁷ (4). In his interviews as well as in his novels, Naipaul maintains an ambiguous position: On the one hand he says : “I feel that I don’t want to be a writer unless I am at the very top” (qtd in Dooley 5), but almost simultaneously deflates the romantic notion of authorship by saying that he could easily give up writing for a certain amount of money, which are conflicting and confusing positions: “Some years ago I remember thinking, if someone said to you, ‘I’ll give you a million pounds, you must stop writing, never write another word,’ I would have said no, quite seriously. [...] Today I would probably do it for much less” (qtd in Dooley 5). These two examples from his interviews prepare us for the Naipaulian ambiguity, found ubiquitously in his characters and novels: Naipaul’s passion almost instantly nullifies itself with reluctance. This conscious ironic twist that easily reveals Naipaul’s and his characters’ faults, shame and private thoughts, marks one of the trademarks of Naipaul’s oeuvre and provides his novels –both fiction and non-fiction– with a peculiar ambivalence which will be dealt in the later sections in this chapter.

⁶ About this phase Naipaul remarks: “I decided only to go to Oxford and do the three-year English course. I didn’t do this for the sake of Oxford and the English course. [...] I did it mainly to get away to the bigger world and give myself time to live up to my fantasy and become a writer” (*Reading*, Naipaul 21-22).

⁷ In *Reading and Writing* Naipaul says: “My school essays weren’t exceptional; they were only crammer’s work. In spite of my father’s example with his stories I hadn’t begun to think in any concrete way about what I might write. Yet I continued to think of myself as a writer” (20).

To say the least, Naipaul's "Eurocentric" work has been polemical and has angered some of his readers and postcolonial critics, including his compatriot Derek Walcott, Homi Bhabha and Edward Said⁸ (Barnouw xiv). As was discussed in the first chapter, the current postcolonial writing trend aligns with counter-discourse and shares an optimistic outlook on the transformative forces of the Third World and postcolonial literature. Naipaul's writing is counter-intuitive in that it openly admits the dominance of the colonial hierarchy and too often criticizes the colonized countries' backwardness with an audaciously harsh tone. Naipaul's staged imprudence is a critique of postcolonial euphemisms and political correctness, which are tools to suppress prejudices by clever disguises of language (Hughes 3). Naipaul might not ally himself with other postcolonial writers in their quest for postcolonial resistance but at least he attempts to unmask the entire process of colonization and decolonization which first labeled the colonized countries as backward and made their people believe in the reality of this fabrication. Rob Nixon, in his book focusing on the non-fictional works of Naipaul, *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* asserts that Naipaul is distasteful of all forms of resistance and adds that Naipaul believes "collective opposition to dependency is itself a species of dependency", which partially reveals the reason for Naipaul's predilection for the Western discourse (153), which is a point of view I share in the frame of my analysis of *The Mimic Men*.

Although Naipaul denies postcolonial resistance, he does not lose hope in postcolonial development: "I do like to look for the seeds of regeneration in a situation; I long to find what is good and hopeful and really do hope that by the most brutal sort of analysis one is possibly opening up the situation to some sort of action; an action which is not based on self-deception" (qtd. Evans 59). Surely Naipaul's pursuit of brutal honesty has a concealed agenda of revealing the bitter truth of the postcolonial situation, which is the fact that they *really* are

⁸ Edward Said in "Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World" accused Naipaul of allowing himself "consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution" (53).

backward (for Naipaul). Naipaul believes that in order to change from a backward to a developed country it is essential to stop “lying to oneself” and start working on the fundamentals of backwardness to be able to take a step forward. For him this is a greater resistance than writing counter-discursive fiction on modes of postcolonial resistance and this is the reason he uses provocative language abundantly:

Certain subjects are so holy that it becomes an act of virtue to lie... never say ‘bush people’, never say ‘backward country’, never say ‘boring people,’ never say ‘uneducated.’ But turn away from what is disagreeable and what happens in the end is that you encourage the chaps there to start lying about themselves too. So they lie because it’s what’s expected of them. Soon everyone begins to lie.
(qtd. in Dooley 3)

Naipaul is well aware of the fact that being a developed or backward country is firstly a matter of discourse and that words like “counter-discourse”, “independent”, “resistance”⁹ can only have a real signification if the postcolonial countries realize that they are still suffering from different modes of colonization and attempts to change this postcolonial predicament, with his unique way of not resisting. Naipaul might be addressing the readers from the colonizer’s superior position by using their very discourse when talking about the colonized countries and standing between the colonizer and the colonized, he takes the advantage to openly criticize the postcolonial countries more brazenly than any other of his Western contemporaries, who need to be ‘delicate’ and politically correct with regards to the issues of the Third World countries.

Believing that political correctness is a form of censorship, Naipaul sets out to show the truth of the postcolonial condition. As Dooley also asserts, Naipaul’s forthright opinions are not related to politics and Naipaul’s self-conscious tactlessness is due to his interest in the truth of the postcolonial condition, which, for him lacks a history and culture (5). In a similar manner, John Clement Ball also notes that in his travel book on the Caribbean, *The Middle*

⁹ About such stock words, the protagonist of *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh says: “Borrowed phrases! [...] We used borrowed phrases which were part of the escape from thought, from that reality we wanted people to see but could ourselves now scarcely face” (237).

Passage (1962), Naipaul criticizes writers for reflecting the prejudices of their racial groups and maintaining the myths of their heroic identity: “West Indian people need writers to tell them who they are, [Naipaul] says, yet they are failed by most of their authors: ‘The insecure wish to be heroically portrayed. Irony and satire, which might help more, are not acceptable; and no writer wants to let down his group’”(qtd. in Ball 41). As can be also seen in the passage, Naipaul is interested in the antiheroic truth of the backward countries and the tools of humour –irony and satire– are the midwives for bringing to light the truth, which would otherwise remain hidden under the heroic myths of the writers. This is the reason why his body of work openly discards the postcolonial attitude of writing back. Instead, Naipaul employs the lens of the child in the tale “Emperor’s New Clothes” in opposition to the current postcolonial literary production which tends to be counter-hegemonic and affirms the superiority of the metropolitan center.

Locating *The Mimic Men* in V.S. Naipaul’s Oeuvre

Owing partially to his spiritual, biological and cultural displacement, the body of Naipaul’s work can be divided into different phases by different critics, all of whom agree on a transition from cultural to personal themes. Timothy Weiss in his critical book on Naipaul *The Margins: The Art of Exile In V.S. Naipaul* makes a three-phase division of his work, all the phases of which have dialectic relationships with one another. He divides Naipaul’s literary phases chronologically as “mediation, alienation and syncreticism” (220). He asserts that in the first phase, from the 1950s to the 1960s “the author mediates between the differing aspects of his identity, between Trinidad and England”, and makes use of irony and satire abundantly to provide a judgmental distance from the metropolitan readers (220). In the second phase, from the 1960s to the 1970s, he remarks that Naipaul “expresses alienation from English society, whose impersonality and decay he describes and from colonial and postcolonial societies, whose problems he continues to analyze” (220). Lastly in the phase of syncreticism,

Naipaul “reconciles his New World and Old World identities and comprehends the world as a changing one of diverse realities and irrationalities” (220).

In the frame of this tripartite division, *The Mimic Men*, written in 1967, stands as a marker of the period of transition from satire to self-reflexivity, still amalgamating problems of his colonial society and growing discontent with losing identity in a foreign land, and trying to redefine the relationship between his colonial selfhood and the metropolitan other (4). John Clement Ball also argues that “*The Mimic Men* is a transitional work for Naipaul, looking ahead to his darker, more overtly intellectualized other fictions” (43). Apart from standing symbolically between Naipaul’s different phases, the novel thematically stands in the nexus of migration, belonging, authenticity and mimicry and constantly falls back on binaries such as fantasy/reality, chaos/order, self/other, colonizer/colonized, past/present: between the pairs is a huge space for Naipaul to unearth the aforementioned “truth” of the postcolonial condition. The novel allows multiple entry points, but in the frame of this study, I aim to discuss the gaps that open space for comedy, which, in turn are transformed into a distinct form of agency that would not be possible in another way.

Before a close analysis, it should be made clear that by no means do I claim that *The Mimic Men* is a comedy, because if anything, the novel is a tragedy that borders on comedy. I aim to divide this chapter to two parts, focusing on different types of gaps that allow various sorts of humour. First of all, I will talk about the stance of the narrator who writes from the secure point of hindsight, which opens up a space between present and past that is quilted with the fusion of the “real” and “imaginary” narrative elements of his personal history. Writing his story from memory, Singh simultaneously writes and rewrites the past happenings, a process in which he alters his past to meet the present needs, as Salman Rushdie asserts in “Imaginary Homelands” (13-14). The intentional use of the retrospective narration transforms itself almost as trope of irony. Secondly, I will go on to discuss the

notion of mimicry through the gap between the colonizer and the colonized and demonstrate how intentional mimicry supplies bitter comedy and agency for the colonized. At the end, I will discuss the gap between Singh's life in and out of 'parenthesis' and conclude that the element of comedy is lost in his life outside the parenthesis – at the end of the writing experience. While analyzing the text, I will focus on the direct relation between belonging and humour and elucidate the idea that when the gaps –narrative, spatial, and existential– in Ralph Singh's life are bridged, the tacit necessity for comedy disappears. This supports the notion that throughout his crooked journey, the elements of humour are opportunities for agency for Singh.

The Irony of Narrative

Irony is the traveler's natural element and rhetorical mode as it is a rhetorical form of displacement, and of distancing. As travelling isolates the individual and puts his values and perceptions to the test through a confrontation with the unfamiliar, irony presents itself as a rhetorical refuge, a mode of expression that marks a strong presence of the enunciating subject, through his questioning of perceived realities. (Baneth-Nouailhetas 125)

Baneth-Nouailhetas explains in her essay on the travel narratives of Naipaul "V.S. Naipaul's Ironic Visions", that irony arises out of a substitution of one ideological frame of reference to another, and in the expectation of getting closer to the 'truth' of the subject matter (125).

Irony requires at least two forms of reference, basically one of which is the framework of appearances and the other of which is that of realities, closer to the core of the truth of the matter. In *The Mimic Men*, this ironic duality reveals itself through the distance between the younger and older Ralph Singhs in the novel. The former is portrayed as the inauthentic colonized while the latter is the embodiment of the colonizer. In the frame of *The Mimic Men*, Naipaulian irony, aiming to gain over the audience's sympathy through humour, is put to the service of Naipaul's ulterior motives of making ideological and political statements, which reiterate Isabella's backwardness and critique the colonial structure that caused it.

In this section of narrative irony, I will discuss the irony entailed by Ralph Singh's insistence of a chronologically-aligned history which results in a failed attempt. *The Mimic Men* could easily have been written in a strictly chronological fashion like a *bildungsroman*, starting from the infancy of Ranjit Kripalsingh in Isabella and ending in the adult life of Ralph Singh in London but it chooses a crooked path instead. The narration does not develop and become more complex but aims to regress to the originary cycle of repetitions until the end, to facilitate Ralph's understanding of himself and surroundings.

In order to connect Naipaul's choice of chaotic over historically-aligned narration, we should first analyze Hayden White's notions of historiography. In the introduction of his book *The Content of The Form*, White elucidates on the process with which meaning is made through certain combinations of value-neutral historical events (16-18). White remarks that chronology by itself is devoid of the meaning and goes on to discuss the organization of narrative that allocates meaning by certain modes of emplotment. He offers the idea that history-telling does not necessarily entail reporting the past as it actually happened but that narrative assigns a certain 'protagonist' and distinct inaugurations, developments and terminations, which create stories out of a distinct organization of history (5-6). Through this comparison of narrative and irony, he asserts that narration and narrativity are the instruments with which one encodes and mediates the "real" (historical) and "imaginary" (narrative) aspects of any given story. The reality of history –the chronological history –, is made meaningful by the imaginative history, that is the narrative history:

The chronicle is organized into a story by the arrangement of the events into the components of a 'spectacle' or process of happening, which is thought to possess a discernible beginning, middle, and end. This *transformation of chronicle into story* is effected by the characterization of some events in the chronicle in terms of inaugural motifs, of others in terms of terminating motifs, and of yet others in terms of transitional motifs. (*Metahistory*, White 5)

White asserts that there is no beginning or end in a chronicle, and that a chronicle is turned into a story with certain points of departure (5). By choosing a confused and confusing

narration, Naipaul defies the “certain points of departure”: the more he writes, the more ironic his endeavour to impose order through narration becomes. Moreover, by openly contradicting himself with remarks like “My first memory of school is of taking an apple to the teacher. This puzzles me. We had no apples on Isabella. It must have been an orange; yet my memory insists on the apple” (109), Singh covertly warns us that his accounts mix truth with imaginary, and finds himself unable to (re)collect the fragments which will complete his history. Thus, instead of recollecting memories, he recreates them in his mind. The ironic statement above is one of many that reveal Naipaul’s mock-self-criticism, which favours the British apple over the Isabellian orange because even the “apples” of the English are more memorable than any fruit of his biologic home Isabella. He ends the quotation with a dignified realization: “The editing is clearly at fault, but the edited version is all I have” (109-110).

The apple and orange incident is not the only one where he opts for binaries. Likewise, Singh divides countries as ‘lands of sea’ -Isabella-and ‘lands of snow’ -London-. As a person who has spent his adolescence in the tropical island of Isabella, Singh’s reaction to his first snow in England is as if he was born to it: “Snow. At last; *my element*” (8 my emphasis). These examples demonstrate that the colonized subject is ready to give up on his culture for the ‘more developed’ metropolitan culture. In a way, Naipaul experiments with the most prototypical peripheral subject, *the* ultimate mimic man, to show the extent of cultural effacement in the Third World because of the colonial agenda of the metropolitan center. The narrator Singh consciously and continuously favours England over Isabella in all his choices which is intentionally exaggerated by Naipaul to shock the reader. Naipaul plays with the overt and covert meanings to increase the tone of smiling criticism in the novel, which is accomplished through covert irony.

As the author Ralph Singh underlines in many passages, he writes the novel to impose order in his life, which has been anything but orderly. “[Writing] was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep *disorder*” (38) or “[...] it must also be confessed that in that dream of writing I was attracted less by the act and the labour than by the calm and the *order* which the act would have implied” (38-39). He fails: the book is written in complicated order: it starts in London in his chosen exile, then goes back to his childhood and adolescence, then his marriage and never ceases to drift between Isabella and London, until the last chapter, in which he finally frees himself from the repetitious cycle of meanings and a fixed cultural identity, which he has sought to claim throughout the novel: “I feel I have lived through attachment and freed myself from one cycle of events”, Singh asserts as the end (300).

The irony of narrative results from Singh’s primordial wish to impose order on his life through writing this novel and his subsequent failure to realize this aim, which is left unuttered throughout the book. I believe that Naipaul’s intentional choice of broken narrative shows that his aim is to highlight his disbelief in any sort of progress, authenticity and sense of order for the colonized subject. Moreover, Naipaul leaves Singh in his hotel room in London without even granting him the awareness that his writing has actually been chronologically chaotic and challenging, which supports the aforementioned irony of narrative, caused by the gap between his wish and subsequent failure to achieve it.

The disorder of narration is of utmost importance in *The Mimic Men*, because it helps to reshape Singh’s history and re-code the object of his representations of reality, while providing a distant ironic narration throughout the book. Singh remarks: “By this re-creation [of the narrative] the event became historical and manageable; it was given its place: it will no longer disturb me” (292). Thanks to the security of hindsight and wisdom of retrospection, Singh feels more confident in mocking the futility of what he calls his life in parenthesis. The

secure position of retrospection grants him the wisdom that he lacked throughout his life in parenthesis, which was guided by mimicry, repetition and inauthenticity.

The failure of order is the smaller portion of narrative irony in the novel. The bigger portion lies with Singh's objectification of his past-self through his rearrangement of the historical facts. It arises mainly through Naipaul's employment of the old Singh to narrate the life of the young Singh. Standing in the position of a 'refined' European, the old Singh is highly self-reflective and critical of the actions of the young Singh. The chronological gap between the two gives way to irony, which would not occur if the novel progressed in a linear fashion. As Tuomas Huttunen quotes from Fawzia Mustafa's *V.S. Naipaul* in his essay "V.S. Naipaul's The Mimic Men: Narrative Transcending of Order and Disorder", Ralph Singh's self-reflexivity in his rearrangement of past events "gains the status of formal trope", which Huttunen explains through the trope of distancing self-reflexive irony, with which "Singh continuously objectifies and distances his past-self from his present self through the self-conscious examination of his own past deeds" (269). Thus, Ralph Singh's account of his life in relation to the political and social changes in Isabella is less than an loyal account of historical facts, and more than a simple biography of a colonial politician.

To give examples, at points the old Singh asks forgiveness for the young colonial politician Singh's lack of foresightedness. The retrospective narration the old, wise and 'European' Ralph Singh mocks the young and foolish Ranjit Kripalsingh: "Understand *my* unsuitability for the role I had created for myself, as politician, as dandy, as celebrant" (47), or "Satire creeps in. But understand *the colonial politician*. It might have been personal indignities that drove him on.... Understand, too, his jumpiness. He knows his own futility.... Understand the jumpiness, the sensitivity to criticism, the solitude" (251-252 my emphasis). It is noteworthy to point out Singh's changing perspective as the narrative continues: at the beginning of the book Singh empathizes with himself –"Understand *my* unsuitability"–, while through the end

he objectifies himself by begging pardon for “*the colonial politician*”. The use of irony demonstrates Naipaul’s mastery of covert meanings: by merely objectifying himself as a grotesque puppet of the bigger colonial system, Singh aims to win the sympathy and favour of the target audience, mainly from English speaking countries, who has to be educated enough to unearth the ‘real’ significations. It also underlines the covert message that, even people in important positions in colonies are no more than puppets, and is used by Naipaul to criticize the colonizer who is the reason for the sorry situation. Naipaul through Singh utilizes bitter mockery when he asks the reader to excuse the colonial politician and colonial politics, an understanding of the situation which comes with the wisdom of hindsight.

In another instance, after Singh gives a lengthy account of his childhood memories, he talks in detail about the transformation of his name (from Ranjit Kripalsingh to first R.R.R Singh, then the transformation of Ranjit to Ralph and division of Kripalsingh to Singh) which is a matter of laughter and scorn for the other students and hence has to be kept a secret for Singh from the age of eight to the age of twenty because he fears being laughed at (111-114). As the narrative unfolds, Singh discloses more of his childhood and adolescence secrets which are of different degrees of importance. When he is done, the old Singh is able to comment on the painful past events with the help of callous retrospection: “I have given a *flippant* account of this episode [from infancy to adolescence]. Flippancy comes easily when we write of past pain; it disguises and mocks that pain” (114 my emphasis). I think that Naipaul intentionally creates the retrospective look to enhance the degree of irony in the novel. Through the narrative of irony, that which used to be sour, bitter and painful represents itself in a manageable kind of distant, crystallized and almost imaginary memory that can no longer harm him.

As we said, the fragmented narrative serves to obscure the moments of past pain in Singh’s life in parenthesis. By changing the sequence of events, Singh intentionally refrains from

juxtaposing the events that pained or embarrassed him with each other. His subconscious denounces his own ironies. For instance there is a scene in which the colonial estate manager Lord Stockwell's daughter Lady Stella and Singh converse about the importance of nursery books in a person's development. When asked about his favourite childhood book, Singh says: "I thought about *The Aryan Peoples and their Migrations* but suppressed it. She was interested in children's books, and I had to confess that apart from some stories by Andersen I had read none" (271). He looks down on his own childhood, which is shown in the attitude of Stella, portrayed as being stereotypical metropolitan subject: "She looked saddened and unbelieving. What she had read as a child was important to her, and it was her theory that understanding was impossible between people who had not read the same children's books or heard the same nursery rhymes" (271). Singh cannot seem to do anything at the right time; he is either ahead of his time or lags behind. At the end of the scene, we see Singh receiving *The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book*, about which he feels ridiculous again (274).

This episode might have only been upsetting but for the chronological juxtaposition. Before Singh leaves the island for the first time, his friends give him a ridiculously erudite book called *Fête Champêtre: The Paintings of Watteau and Fragonard* (214), a painting book, slightly ridiculous, given that they do not have access to much art in the island of Isabella. The juxtaposition of the two books is ironic, but what is more ironic is Singh's subconscious attempt to free himself from the juxtaposition that upset him. In one we have the vision of a potential scholar who will save his race by becoming an intellectual in London, in the other, we see the same person downsized to a child, without any possibility of being respected. But for the fragmented narrative, the two scenes would have been sequentially closer, which would be more ironic forthrightly. The last irony in terms of the books is that the intellectual level of the books decreases in contrast to his age: from *The Aryan Peoples*

and their Migrations to Fête Champêtre: The Paintings of Watteau and Fragonard and lastly to *The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book*, which is ironic.

To sum up the section about the relation between humour and narrative, I have discussed two types of irony in the narration of the novel, the former resulting from the gap between order and its ultimate resolution to disorder, and latter as a natural consequence of Naipaul's choice of the old and 'wise' Ralph Singh as the narrator who makes ironical remarks from his so-called European vantage point. The chronological gap between Singh's present and past selves opens a narrative gap which is occupied by self-inflicted irony, without which the novel would be a stereotypical tale of identity struggle.

On the other hand, there is a further twist in his irony in that even at the end of the novel, Naipaul does not show us Ralph Singh as wise as he thinks himself to be, because at the end of the novel Singh has not realized that his writing was more chaotic than orderly. Naipaul's distorted sequence of scenes and events is an act of intentional irony which would otherwise be only tragic, and agonizing the colonized openly is not a method Naipaul would resort to, given his disregard for the subordinate condition of the colonized. The ironic twist in the narrative helps transmit Naipaul's skepticism more convincingly than direct narrative would (Baneth-Nouailhetas 131), and hence indirectly facilitates it for Singh to comment on his private shames and fears as a citizen of Isabella and a colonial politician. The destabilizing function of consciously employed irony should be further juxtaposed with ambivalence and intentional mimicry, which are the main elements of Singh's agency in the novel.

Carnival Ambivalence and Intentional Mimicry

[Carnival laughter] is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Secondly, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is *ambivalent*: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. (Bakhtin 200)

In his doctorate thesis *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin discusses folk humour in the Medieval Ages as a destabilizing force against the medieval ecclesiasticism and feudal culture and a temporary release from dogmatism (Bakhtin 195-196). Bakhtin argues that the civil ceremonies took on a comic aspect as “clowns and fools” mimicked the serious rituals of the feudal and religious system (295-6). The tripartite distinction of the qualities of carnival laughter offers an appropriate entry point to the concept of carnival ambivalence in relation to the employment of mimicry in *The Mimic Men*. Despite seeming irrelevant and addressing different eras and social problems, colonial mimicry and carnival ambivalence share some basic grounds with regards to subversive humour in *The Mimic Men*.

The first distinction of the complex nature of carnival laughter foregrounds that carnival laughter necessarily deals with social events. To juxtapose this notion with postcolonialism, we can assert that the injustices of feudal culture in Rabelais’s time draw a parallel to the inequalities that the colonial project bred. The second feature of carnival laughter is its universality in scope with which Bakhtin asserts that festive laughter is directed at those who laugh, and thus subverts the official hegemony. This is also one of the founding principles of Naipaul’s mimicry. With universality, Bakhtin denotes the aforementioned concept of *referentiality* of the current postcolonial literatures, which means a constant dialogue between the two poles of the hierarchical power structure. Still, he leaves us in an indeterminate position as to who the laughter turns to at the end. The last and most important feature of carnival laughter is its ambivalent nature because of its natural affinity to colonial mimicry in *The Mimic Men*, and will therefore be discussed more extensively.

In *Rabelais*, talking about one thing, Bakhtin simultaneously talks about two: when there is the serious, there is laughter; when there is the tragic, it is presented with its counterpart as comedy because this is how the official hegemony is subverted. Whatever is serious has to appear with its comic double, and the comic double is consciously allowed by the official

authorities, because this position arises out of the sheer necessity of equality, which can be granted for a limited time in a limited space. This is how the suppressed make themselves heard: comedy supplies agency. Yet their discourse is ambivalent: they ridicule and praise, debase and revive, mortify and renew but perform all this in the space allocated to them by the official authorities. I believe that the tools and the manners of medieval carnivalesque are parallel to the intentional use of mimicry in *The Mimic Men*.

As Homi Bhabha has extensively argued in “Of Mimicry and Man”, in an attempt to reform and civilize the colonized, the self-justifying discourse of the metropolitan center aims at marking the colonized as the Other while at the same time attempting to assimilate the colonized into the larger corpus of the colonial project (122-3). By making the colonized normalize their inherent Otherness while internalizing Empire’s cultural superiority, the colonizer would disarm the colonized from all the weapons they would need for a possible counter-hegemonic struggle. This symbiotic relationship would mean cultural effacement on behalf of the colonized, and would result in creating harmless replicas –mimics–of the colonizer (122-3). However, as Bhabha aptly demonstrates, in real practice this benevolent mimicry transforms itself to malevolent menace. Mimicry becomes a subversive mode of resistance by destabilizing the superiority of the Empire through the same mechanics of discourse that objectified them as the Other (123-8). “The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (126). The mimic other necessarily modifies the mimicked, and thereby unconsciously parodies it, and adds elements from their own culture: the result falls into an indeterminate state: *almost the same, but not quite* (122).

Throughout the novel, Singh attempts to create an authentic personality which is based on the Aryan myths that he aspires to¹⁰. However, as Bhabha also asserts, “the desire to emerge as authentic” through mimicry and repetition is the pitfall of the whole project of mimicry, mocking itself (126). From his childhood on, Ralph Singh obeys the mini-structures of power which are his nephew Cecil and his mother’s family who own a Coca-Cola bottling company called Bella Bella. He seems to denounce his father’s family who own virtually nothing. However, soon enough he reveals one of his secrets that he favours his father’s family because of its biologically superior roots: “I cherished my mother’s family and their Bella Bella Bottling Works. But in my secret life I was the son of my father, and a Singh” (Naipaul 117). This is one of the first examples of Ralph’s emergence as an ambivalent character: he seems to favour materiality over his heritage, but in reality he identifies with the the roots of his father mainly because for him his father represents the masculine Aryan figure. Denouncing the constructions essential to his identity by failing to side with either his mother or his father, Ranjit as a child learns to perform in the ways that cater to his needs. The reverence for authority is combined with the lack of authenticity, and Ralph emerges as the benevolent replica, the authorized version of Otherness that the imperial project the colonizer so willfully tried to promote.

As we said, Ralph Singh repeats rather than represents, willfully becoming the inauthentic other. Just like Bhabha has theorized, Singh aims to become authentic through repetition and mimicry, which results in continuous failure (Bhabha 126). Yet still, throughout his school life he recounts the tales in which he continuously competes with the Hok, who is of Chinese origin and Deschampfneus of French origin to be the best and the most original at something because he simply envies their roots, which he thinks, are ‘pure’. Consequently, Ralph falls into the ambiguity of the search for authenticity with the tool of imitation. On the one hand,

¹⁰ In order to relate to the metropolitan center the child Singh reads a book called *The Aryan Peoples and Their Migrations*.

he normalizes imitation as a tool of identity formation with phrases like “In all our slogans we assumed the role of metropolitan party-givers. We did so easily; at Isabella Imperial we were *natural* impersonators” (144 my emphasis). However, the wish to emerge as authentic never ceases: “I envied [Hok] his elegant manner, and I believe he envied me my manner. With Deschampsneufs I had belching matches. With Hok I had another sort of competition” (115). Singh goes on to describe in excessive detail the content of the competition, in a crescendo of grotesque: first the class decide that both Hok and Ranjit are nervous characters, then they try their best to prove that they are more nervous than each other through ridiculous acts like gazing at the ceiling, eating a whole page of a textbook, chewing their collars, and eating their school ties to rags (115). After failing to become the most nervous of the class, Ranjit first takes up cricket and then athletics in order to be the first and the best in something not tried before. As with anything else, the first step of doing is by imitating: “I took up athletics. I made my mother get me running shorts and I practised assiduously in the college grounds in the afternoons. I *imitated* the older athletes” (137).

The early examples of Singh’s honest acceptance of inauthenticity are ubiquitous. When Singh grows up to become a politician, the manner remains imitative while the topics of imitation change: instead of imitating the party-goers or the athletes, they now imitate the metropolitan politicians and borrow their ideas of independence. The bigger the project, the more excessive the detail, the bigger the failure, the more bitter the irony. When talking about the political agenda of their newly found political party, the old Singh cannot help a depersonalized and ironic tone:

What did we talk about? [...] We were socialist. We stood for the dignity of the working man. We stood for the dignity of distress. We stood for the dignity of our island, the dignity of our indignity. Borrowed phrases! Left-wing, right-wing: did it matter? (237)

Instead of talking about the political agenda, throughout his political career Singh comments on their verisimilitude to the ‘real’ metropolitan politicians. Here is one of the many passages

where he delineates their political actions rather as a playact and drama, and only comments on the physical appearance of the colonial politician in public meetings:

Create the scenes then. Imagine Browne, the leader in his shabby journalist's suit, energetic, enthusiastic, frequently breaking into the local dialect, for purposes of comedy or abuse. Beside him set myself, as elegant in dress as in speech: I knew my role. Imagine the public meetings in squares, in halls. Imagine the tours along dusty country roads in the late afternoon and at night, the leadlights illuminating the walls of sugarcane on either side. [...] Imagine the lengthening reports of our speeches in the *Inquirer*. (231)

In this passage, like many more in the book, Singh describes the appearances of the leaders in detail, rather than talking about the philosophy and agenda of the party. As we mentioned previously, Naipaul aims at demonstrating the social realities of the colonized and it is only by facing the ugly truth that his people can overcome this “backwardness” stereotype, which is unfortunately not a stereotype but the truth for Naipaul. To do this Naipaul resorts to excess of detail and this is why there are grotesquely detailed descriptions of events.

It is only natural that the moment of election is the moment the party stops functioning because there is no ‘real’ agenda behind the movement. The movement offers drama: the movement is only based on drama and playacting. It necessarily deals with abstractions because even the ideas of revolution and decolonialization are obtained from the West. Although they can mimic the process perfectly well, they cannot mimic its reality, as Singh muses:

We, here on our island, handling books printed in this world, and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten. We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new. (175)

The colonial politicians know how to look and talk like metropolitan politicians (throwing pool parties with caviar and champagne) but they lack the intellectual resources with which to claim full independence of Isabella. The result is an inevitable failure simply because the originators of the movement only replicate the exterior aspects of the Empire but lack

responsibility and intellectual maturity. As Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffiths also claim, the reason for their political failure is caused by the lack of the real representations of truth, which must lie in the metropolitan center: “The colonial ‘mimicry’ is a mimicry of the ‘original’ the ‘true’ which exists at the source of power. [...] The peripheral lacks order because it lacks the power of representation. Since the truth lies elsewhere, language can only mimic the representation for the truth” (90).

Throughout the novel, V.S. Naipaul tries to convince the audience about the backwardness of Isabella and the inauthenticity of its subjects, thereby denouncing all the positivist opinions about the development of the Third World. Most of the time he exaggerates intentionally, which can be seen blatantly in the title of the book: *The Mimic Men*. He posits mimicry as the only valid tool for the colonized subject while simultaneously mocks him for using it. However, I believe that he uses such excessive detail and overtly stereotypical mimicry not to reiterate the subjugation of the colonial periphery and beg for sympathy but for more discreet and subversive purposes. To achieve these aims, first of all Naipaul acts as the metropolitan center to his characters –especially Singh-and alienates them from their culture. Then, through narrative he brazenly starts stripping them of their private anxieties and fears. After provocatively disturbing the characters’ public and private spheres, Naipaul leaves no solid ground for his characters to stand on. This is the point that mimicry succors the periphery, to give the colonized subjects meaning of themselves, because after all, despite all the subjugation it entails, being in a binary structure is better than standing nowhere.

As Ashcroft et al. also have aptly posited, despite its seeming reductionism, Naipaul’s mimicry is both ambivalent and multi-layered: “The mimicry of the post-colonial subject is [...] always potentially destabilizing to colonial discourse, and locates an area of considerable political and cultural uncertainty in the structure of imperial dominance” (125). The degraded mimic supplies irony not of the colonizer *per se*, but of “the whole process of decolonization”

(125). Naipaul affirms that there is nothing beyond this colonial binary structure for those who mimic and those who are mimicked, but this intentional affirmation opens up a gap for the comic, which helps him take a step back and mock his mimic men as well as the colonizer. Singh accepts the binary structure of the colonial relationality and the fact that he will always be on the side of the oppressed regardless of his stance in the colonized society, be it a student or a politician. By becoming the mimic, he can at least easily and simultaneously point to the inauthenticity of the colonized person, as well as at the superstructures that reduced him to this position.

Elleke Boehemer remarks that especially the early stages of anti-colonial mobilization have witnessed extensive use of assimilation, or *subversion by imitation* as an important mode of resistance: “Conducted from within colonial structures, assimilation was at this time perhaps more subversively effective than a more mechanistic nativist reversal” (165). Her notion of *subversion through imitation* helps us contextualize the fact that Naipaul mimicry is *intentional*: Naipaul is fully aware that he is dealing with a mimic, who is self-conscious enough to repeat that he is a mimic. I believe that this intentionality opens up space for Singh to differentiate himself from those who are mimics without knowing it. Singh embraces intentional mimicry because this is the only legitimate space allocated to him for coping both with his life as a peripheral subject and a failure. I think Naipaul also employs an intentionally mimic character who can play the fool in Bakhtin’s carnival, simultaneously realizing and denouncing his own self. The mimic Ralph Singh has the agency to repeat whatever metropolitan trait he likes and is not held responsible¹¹ for his failures, the ultimate being the

¹¹ Naipaul remarks that a sense of responsibility is of utmost importance in the development of a Third World nation: “One of the terrible things about being a Colonial [...] is that you must accept so many things as coming from a great wonderful source outside yourself and outside the people you know, outside the society you've grown up in. That can only be repaired by *a sense of responsibility*, which is what the colonial doesn't have. Responsibility for the other man. As a colonial, you must first seek to remove yourself from what you know, and become blest personally, before you can become responsible for others” (Evans 40).

failed mission of colonial independence, after which Singh forsakes his country without any guilty conscious and settles permanently in London¹².

Repetition versus Closure

There is no way to get a firm handle on *The Mimic Men*, no way the novel can be reduced to a meaning or a set of meanings. There are too many discourses, often of a contradictory, mutually cancelling nature, going at once; the work is constructed as a labyrinth which, while seeming to take the reader in one direction and then another, circles around on itself while each step is loaded with ambiguity and ironies. (King 75)

Where does Naipaul *really* locate himself in this colonial binary? Is it too much to expect his bitter humour as a very covert tool of resistance? Bruce King asserts in his critical work *V.S. Naipaul*, that it is an extremely difficult task to locate where Naipaul stands in *The Mimic Men* with regards to the issues of belonging and identity, because he simultaneously leads and misleads the reader with false clues, dead ends, ironic asides and the repetitive structure of narrative (75). My answer is that Naipaul's ambiguous position is actually not so ambiguous when his intentions are closely inspected. As can be understood clearly from his interviews and non-fictional work, Naipaul is trying to wake the dormant colonized by his unique exposure of the colonial subject, which are intentionally harsh and obnoxious.

Until now, we have discussed the narrative that gives way to irony as a tool of protection from the past and mimicry as an intentional device to subvert and destabilize the colonial structure, both of which deal with two reference frames and benefit from the slippage in between. In the last section I would like to focus on the ultimate chapter of the book in which Singh forsakes Isabella and takes refuge in a transient hotel in London, where he decides to stay permanently. This section of the novel provides the reader with the opportunity to compare Singh's life in parenthesis (the childhood, the political life and the marriage) with his

¹² However, after he starts writing his memories he regrets having forsaken his country although it is too late: "[Leaving Isabella] seemed logical enough to me at the time. Now it seems irresponsible" (245). This marks mark Singh's becoming a mature person at the end of the novel.

ultimate break away from the repetitive cycles (his new identity as a displaced writer in London) through the act of writing, and shows how he ultimately becomes a free-standing agent when he frees himself from all the fixed notions of identity.

In his life in parenthesis, Singh holds on to certain fixed concepts like “simplicity”, “placidity” and “lucidity” in different contexts. Holding on to fixed schemas, this “fugal composition of the narrative” helps Singh make sense of his identity and orders his life in the island of Isabella, which is pervaded by chaos (King 71). For instance, Singh uses the exact same phrase “Certain ideas overwhelm by their simplicity,” two times in the novel, the first with regards as to how easy it was to break a revolution thanks to the magazine *The Socialist* (223) and the second to emphasize how easy it was to take over the political leadership in Isabella (226). As in many other passages, throughout his life in parenthesis Singh fits the outside events in the schemes in his mind, which were shaped by the metropolitan center. When the schemes can not suffice, Singh flees to London as a nonentity to return to his alleged Aryan roots.

However, Singh is ambivalent towards London too: first he defines London as the center of order “The great city, centre of the world, in which, feeling disorder, I had hoped to find the beginning of order” (22), but at the end, he criticizes London for the greater disorder in which one loses sense of identity more easily: “For those who lose, and nearly everyone in the end loses, there is only one course: flight. *Flight to the greater disorder, the final emptiness: London and the home counties*” (10-11 my emphasis). However, no matter how much Singh might criticize London as he criticizes Isabella, the mode and tone of the criticism is different. Although he seems to stand equidistant to Isabella and London, he sees the latter as the lesser evil and at the end decides to reside there permanently. Naipaul is never explicitly critical of the colonizers and he never uses them as subjects of ridicule and laughter. He just uses them as the ground tool of mockery, against which he measures the colonized characters. As

discussed previously, Naipaul does not oppose, just on the contrary *affirms* willingly. Singh's life in parenthesis almost openly says to the colonizer: "We are what you think we are!" I believe through this affirmation, Naipaul aptly mocks the grounds for a need of counter-hegemonic discourse.

The unsolvable nature of belonging opens up space for comedy and irony and Ralph acquires his agency through the role of intentional mimic. It is only when his life in parenthesis ends that he starts to lose the sense of comedy, which is clearly manifested in the chapter of the novel (in which he forsakes Isabella to live permanently in London) because the gaps between fantasy and reality, order and disorder, now and past slowly disappear. Rather than being a mimic nonentity, Singh prefers standing outside the colonial binary structure. He does not need to use comedy for subversive purposes anymore because his sense of irony, primarily caused by his problem of belonging and identity, has left him. Between migrations and crises, Singh is spent to the marrow. The excerpt below talks about the loss of the most important thing to him: history. When he loses the most primordial way of relating to the world, his world vision is cleared. During his short trip around England in the last chapter, he remarks:

I was fighting the afternoon alarm of homelessness, an inseparable part of the gypsy life that had inexplicably befallen me. But this was the limit of desolation. *The moment linked to nothing. I felt I had no past.* Nothing had happened that morning or yesterday or the last eleven days. To attempt to explain my presence in this station to myself or to look forward to the increasingly improbable search that awaited me in a London to which I was drawing no nearer, to attempt to do either was to be truly lost, to see myself at the end of the world. (299 my emphasis)

History is the nightmare from which Singh eventually awakes. This is the limit of his life as a vagabond and the point where he is able to openly accept his homelessness. From here on, to the end of the book, a more positive attitude towards life emerges. When he gives up on the mythical ties of the past, he also feels free to do away with the whole concept of belonging and hence with humour.

The chiasmatic gap between the past and the present, which I discussed in the beginning of the chapter, is bridged now. Mimicry, which pervades the life of parenthesis of Ralph Singh, is lost only after writing the book, an act in which he claims his refuge as well as his agency. The fragmented picture of Rushdie in “Imaginary Homelands” has been first undone, then redone, and eventually done away with (12). Drama fails, irony ceases. Just like making errors is a natural sign of progress, mimicking is a means of achieving self-realization, and his intentional mimicry shows that he has made a lot of progress in realizing his own selfhood, without resorting to imaginary Aryan roots. At the end Ralph Singh becomes a self-standing agent, who has come to terms with the issue of belonging and thus discards the agency that comes with bitter humour. This is the point where I have to say *Dixi*¹³, because I believe that this is the ultimate moment of closure in the tumultuous life of Ralph Singh.

¹³ *Dixi* is the last word of *The Mimic Men* and it means “I have said”.

CHAPTER 3

‘S’ FOR SILENCE, SUBVERSION AND SARCASM IN

ADMIRING SILENCE

“*Silence* is the most perfect expression of scorn.”

George Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*

Admiring Silence is the fifth novel of the Tanzanian writer Abdulrazak Gurnah, whose body of work is dominated by themes of cultural identity and displacement. Born in 1948 in the island of Zanzibar, Abdulrazak Gurnah (like V.S. Naipaul) went to Britain for academic purposes in 1968 and has resided there ever since. Like the protagonist of *Admiring Silence*, Gurnah has also experienced adversities of cultural displacement and admits struggling to negotiate an identity between his past experience and his new identity in Britain, which has been the main influence for writing (Nasta 356). His novels generally document the aftermath of immigration to the metropolis and demonstrate the prevailing effects of colonial legacy on immigrants experience. *Admiring Silence* is also a part of this corpus of writing in the respect that it addresses the readers from the unstable area of two cultures and identities, and searches for the quintessence of what it means to belong. It foregrounds the fact that immigration is synonymous with the notion of compromise and demonstrates that identity is about ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’. Gurnah remarks in an interview with Susheila Nasta that:

In all the books I’ve written, I’ve always been interested in the issue of people *negotiating their ‘identities’*. I suppose at one point I thought this was intensified for people dislocated from their place of origin. I’ve always been interested in exploring the idea that people remake themselves, reshape themselves. [...] That people come from so far away, to a place like Europe, and have to change or transform. They have no choice; you can’t continue as you are. (356)

As Gurnah asserts, *Admiring Silence* is a familiar saga of what life might be like for any colored immigrant who moves from the colonized periphery to the metropolitan center. The colonized subject suffers from displacement when he leaves his “home” town in Tanzania and leads a life with his partner Emma and their ‘illegitimate’ daughter Amelia in London. The nameless narrator slowly creates a new identity for himself to adapt to his new environment, one which is unfortunately constructed on the colonizers’ stereotypical notions of the colonized. Still, no matter how successfully he might assimilate the ways of the metropolis, he suffers from cultural displacement and confronts overt racism by the ignorant white majority, who openly excludes, discriminates and rejects him. On the other hand, when he returns to Tanzania for a short visit after 20 years, he realizes that he has “lost the casual assurance” of being with his people because of having lived as a stranger among the other strangers for too long (Gurnah 149). Consequently the fallen hero fails to establish a healthy connection between his two worlds and thus falls in between them, until he takes refuge in writing alternative stories, which he gradually starts to believe in.

This chapter deals with the question of how it is possible to negotiate an identity in a space between the initial and inherited cultures of an immigrant by addressing the elements of humour and silence in the novel. Although this study does not focus on the theme of silence, it’s essential to study the concept for this chapter because silence and sarcasm share similar functional purposes, such as resistance and subversion. The analysis of humour would not be complete without the elements of silence and hence it will be discussed in relation to humour. Before focusing on the relationship between humorous resistance and belonging, I will firstly discuss contemporary theories on cultural identity in relation to the novel, for I think that a great portion of Gurnah’s sarcasm is a result of his marginal stance in English society which openly refuses to let him belong. Secondly, I will discuss irony, silence and silent sarcasms – results of his in-betweenness – as tools of self-protection and resistance against the cultural

domination he faces in London, and that humour opens a space for him to negotiate his identity. Lastly I will discuss Gurnah's choice of narrative strategies, which bring out the silent sarcasms in the book, again in relation to the narrator's ambivalent position in both cultures -an outsider in London and a bystander in Zanzibar. I will conclude with Homi Bhabha's notion of "third space", which I think is the solution Gurnah offers to the problem of unbelonging.

Humorous Resistance against Cultural Essentialism

The opening scene of *Admiring Silence* takes place in a doctor's room, and the narrator has already spent twenty years in England as an immigrant when we meet him. Having twenty years of experience under his belly, the narrator does not deal with the question of whether he will belong, for he already has the internalized knowledge that he will always stand out as 'marginal' in England no matter what he does. Having failed his daughter who has turned out to be more English than English, and having proven inadequate in his mission to fulfill his aims of becoming an important person after came to London, the narrator admits: "I'm a tragedy" and goes on to say that although "feeble and futile" *sarcasm* is his only defense (12 my emphasis). This is one of the most candid explanations he gives as to why he is sarcastic in face of the cruelty of the metropolis, and the ground of my argument on humour's eventual transformation into resistance.

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, Stuart Hall in his influential essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" offers two kinds of cultural identity; the first focuses on fixity, common historical experiences and shared cultural codes while the second is about positioning oneself in relation to other people and cultures. He categorizes this division as "identity as essentialism" and "identity as transformation" (223-224). He remarks that essentialist view of identity is static and focuses on the past rather than the future when

making cultural divisions. At the end of the essay, Hall sides with the second notion of identity and concludes that cultures are always in a state of transformation. He explains:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. (225)

In the same line with Salman Rushdie's notions of "imagined" homelands and Benedict Anderson's "imagined" nations, Hall sides with the fictional qualities of constructed notions of belonging, which is in direct contrast with the fundamentalist imperial notions that favour the colonizer over the colonized by a self-justifying system that naturalizes their historical "superiority". Identity essentialism reiterates the historical superiority of the Empire, while identity transformation disregards history as a valid base for identity because it is prone to change and transform constantly with outside influence. About the issue, Gurnah remarks that identity essentialism causes a crude and unnatural separation between people "only in terms of their appearance, or in some cases, foisted ancestry". He expands on his argument: "Even if you didn't claim this ancestry, you were given it whether you wanted it or not" and demonstrates that his way of opposing identity essentialism has been through the medium of writing: "I thought it was necessary to try and write and see how it might have worked if you portrayed a society that was actually fragmented" to break the homogeneity that is caused by this essentialist notion which views society as an intact corpus and regards difference as deviance (Nasta 360).

Moreover, Gurnah points out in his essay on his writing experience "Writing & Place" that "colonialism legitimized itself by reference to a hierarchy of race and inferiority, which found form in a number of narratives of culture, knowledge, and progress. It also did what it could to persuade the colonized to defer to this account" (27). He notes that cultural essentialism is still the dominating view for the colonizer: "It still amazes me that the way people think and

talk about Britain is somehow separated from the way they deal with the rest of the world” (Nasta 356). In short, no matter how much the “transformative” notion of identity might be holistic and disregards historical inequalities in the intellectual world, in *Admiring Silence* Gurnah sets out to demonstrate that it is not applicable in the daily metropolitan social sphere.

Essentially, the novel is based on the conflict between the metropolitan center who favours “identity as fundamentalism” over “identity as transformation”, and the peripheral subject who has to transform his identity to fit in a new society. Although it is reductionist to think of cultural identity in mutually exclusive binaries, it is how the issue is portrayed in the novel: the colonizers, with their idealized and idyllic imperialist visions, are portrayed to be too set in their ways to give up on the inherited and ‘essential’ superiority of their culture and disregard the colonial subjects’ endeavors to negotiate their identity, which is doomed to remain ‘peripheral’ and ‘subordinate’. Eventually, I think the rupture between the fixed and the transformative notions of identity, which has proven impossible to piece together in the novel, allows humour to intervene and alleviate the condition of the colonial subject through silent but smiling criticism.

All of the encounters of the narrator with the colonizer are marked by a conflict between essentialist and transformative notions of identity and the best examples of these encounters are those between the narrator and his partner Emma and her parents. The parents view cultural identity as something to be discovered and historical, rather than a complex construct of discourses. They live in what Salman Rushdie calls the ‘superior’ dream-England, “a dream from which too many white Britons refuse to awake” (18). For instance, while defending her country half heartedly, Emma remarks: “Think of all the things that we gave you, that you might not have got otherwise. At least admit that. We may have taken away the odd trinket to exhibit in the British Museum, but we didn’t come empty handed. We gave you individualism, the frigidaire, Holy Matrimony” (16). In this instance as well as many others,

the reader almost involuntarily looks for irony, which is absent. With such examples, Gurnah shows that even Emma, who thinks of herself as a rebel against the normative discourse of the Empire, is not very different than those who openly believe in its reality. However, although Gurnah seems to reiterate the colonizers' sense of cultural superiority, he knows that identity is a matter of constructions, compensations and compromises and thus plays on the discrepancy between the two standpoints with the help of the nameless narrator, who still suffers from the negative impact of imperial essentialism even after twenty years.

For the narrator it is not as much a case of believing in the fundamentals of cultural hierarchy as it is about representing himself as a subservient colonizer – compliant with the ancient binary between the colonizer and the colonized – that causes the irony in the book. It is this very point of differentiation that both helps him create his identity space and makes him reside in that which he silently creates. It is also this point of departure where he starts drinking three rums and smoking three cigarettes a day. It is also this point of discrepancy that causes the multi-layered “alternative” stories in this book with a growing gap of inside and outside, self and other, public and private, speech and silence. The intentional and staged subversions of the narrator are the main elements of the humor in the novel. In short, using bitter humor is a way of coping with his dislocation, homelessness and chosen exile in London.

However, this is the spoken part of the humour and only the top of the iceberg: silent sarcasm and verbal irony are used abundantly by him mainly in face of the white males in London to demonstrate his unleashed anger within, making only the readers aware of his real feelings. The narrator's sarcasm is not voiced, because he knows that he cannot survive in London if he really declares what he thinks. Thus, a great portion of the sarcastic and ironic remarks remain unuttered, and rarely find place in the narrator's discourse, which is based mainly on fabricating alternative stories to please his audience. For instance, instead of

criticizing the colonial mission of the Empire, the narrator tells Mr. Willoughby how much his society benefited from their rule, with many sarcastic hints:

“The Empire selflessly brought us knowledge and education and civilization and the good things that Europe had learned to make for itself and which until today we have still not learned to make for ourselves. Instead of being left in our degenerate darkness for centuries to come, within a few decades we were opened up and dragged into the human community” (73).

In the discussion of Naipaul’s use of irony, we analyzed the mechanics of humour, and remarked that irony necessarily deals with two layers of references (Baneth-Nouailhetas 125).

According to *Collins Dictionary* sarcasm is “speech or writing that actually means the opposite of what it says. It is usually intended to mock or insult”. Like irony, sarcasm too takes advantage of two reference frames, one that deals with the reality as others see, while the other is reality as it really happened: appearances are juxtaposed with actualities. Sarcasm can even be considered as a form of verbal irony, and is taken to be a more severe form of criticism than criticism that is directly expressed (Cartsburg 4-6). John Haiman, where he makes a distinction between plain (sincere) and unplain (including sarcasm and other tools of language) forms of speech, discusses in his book, *Talk Is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation and the Evolution of Language*, that whatever intention the speaker might have, linguistically the sarcastic speaker achieves two things: he “communicates an ostensible message” to the audience while at the same time framing a metamessage that says “I don’t mean [what I say]: in fact, I mean the opposite” (23).

In *Admiring Silence*, the narrator just means the opposite of what he seems to affirm throughout the novel. The nameless colonial subject constantly utilizes this distinction between the overt meanings and their subtexts for his sarcasm, however, the targets of his sarcasm unfortunately lack the intellectual maturity to realize that they are being mocked. Moreover, the narrator can never only poke fun at the colonizer, first he has to mock himself and his subservient position. His sarcasm is double edged: in order to criticize the colonizer,

the colonized always has to take a detour. This is the distinct quality that sarcasm takes in the postcolonial context: before you can make fun of “them”, you have to mock yourself and your situation as the “Other”, which is the subservient position that has been historically fixed by the colonizer. As an example, the narrator remarks: “Our part of the deal was to be colonized, assimilated, educated, alienated, integrated, suffer clashes of culture, become corrupt, starve and grumble about it all. It’s a good deal, and we perform our parts to the utmost of our humble talents, but not adequately enough to satisfy over-sensitive patriots” (16).

Laura Rice touches on the subject in her book *Of Irony and Empire*, which scrutinizes the holistic representations of the Africans and Muslims from the 1st World War on. She claims that irony and mimicry are abundantly used by the postcolonial writers and theoreticians for their transformative powers, be it apotropaic (protective) or therapeutic (curative) (5). Both these strategies are familiar in the frame of *Admiring Silence*. One of the main examples of her argument is Fanon’s subversive narrative strategy in *The Wretched of the Earth*, which I think is parallel to the way Gurnah employs irony and sarcasm in the novel. Rice says:

Fanon highlights the ironic context of the colonial project by *dramatizing* the discourse of the colonizer. Performance, which is always on the epistemological fence between individual speech (a doing/a subject) and the typical discourse that defines a given role (a thing done/an object), provides Fanon with a way to place the unironic monologue in a highly ironic world.

Often through the use of indirect free discourse, the narrative device that allows a character to say one thing in a scene where the author implies the opposite, Fanon lets the settler dramatize the hypocrisy and pathology of the colonial arrangements. The lack of irony found in the colonial period suggests not just a simple investment in the “reality” of the grand narrative of colonialism (progress, evolutionary history, etc.) but a substantial dose of bad faith and denial. (11)

In a parallel gesture of Fanon’s refraining from irony and hence dramatizing the hypocrisy of the colonial project, the narrator always talks about their heroic deeds to Emma’s father, Mr. Willoughby, who is enthusiastic about listening to stories about the Empire which make him feel comfortable in his sense of superiority. The narrator’s attempt of storytelling is almost

like a continuation of the oral tradition, which is a cultural feature of Africa (Hand 4), but is again intentionally misused for purposes of colonial subversion. Like the protagonist of *The Mimic Men* Ranjit, the narrator makes detailed lists and indulges in the grotesque of detailed exaggerations of the benevolent colonial rule, while he means just the opposite. However, no matter how much might exaggerate the despair of his own people and the magnanimity of imperial heroism, Mr. Willoughby never doubts that he might actually be mocked. Below is one of the many stories about the Empire that caricature the situation:

[Mr. Willoughby] was hungry for an Empire story, but my tongue felt leaden and discoloured, my head pounding with discontent. In the end I started to tell him about the English hospital sister who saved my life. I had gone to the hospital to say goodbye to an aunt who was just about to expire from a complex amalgam of bush yaws, leprosy, bilharzia and infectious boils, all of which are brought on by inherited effects of dissipation and lasciviousness. [...] I collapsed on the steps, where the [English] sister found me and had me carried to a bed. She did not leave my side until I was fully recovered two weeks later, bathing my brow with watered wine, and placing her wetted handkerchief so I could drink. (30)

The story, the main theme of which is imperial selflessness and good-will, goes on for another page, openly overstating the colonizer's magnanimity in the underdeveloped Zanzibar. The plot is stale and the narration is intentionally made flat. Anyone who knows a little about colonial history would easily realize that colonialism can be discussed in terms of economic and cultural exploitation rather than the selfless aims of the Empire to improve the culture of the 'backward' societies. This is the reason that the story is an easy piece of satire for the reader as well as for the narrator and Emma. However, to the perception of the zealous imperial lover Mr. Willoughby, who still believes in the truth of the colonial mission, it is another flattering story of "the white man's burden".

Although the narrator never rebukes Mr. Willoughby overtly, he uses the subtle strategies of sarcasm to resist and protect himself from Mr. Willoughby's imperialist attitude. The narrator cannot change the past and undo the historical inequality, but with the help of

narration he can dismantle its axiomatic importance by intentionally¹⁴ victimizing himself. The main tool he employs in mockery is the very colonial discourse itself and he “adopts and adapts” the white tongue for his own purposes. He does not, for one moment, attempt to use the counter-discursive language of resistance, which would result in accusing Mr. Willoughby openly of the destruction of colonialism in Zanzibar. Coming from the periphery back to the colonizer, the flat stories turn the convex mirror to make the giant colonizer into miniatures of what they assume they are.

The Ironic Plural-Partiality of the Sarcastic Narrator

In the previous section, I have discussed the use of humour to stage subversions and mock the ignorance of the metropolitan center about their gullibility concerning the imperial project. However, apart from the staged subversions, there is a bigger non-verbal mode of resistance strategy employed in the novel: silent sarcasm and verbal irony are used abundantly by the narrator mainly in face of the white males in London to demonstrate his unleashed anger within, making only the readers aware of his real feelings. Narrator’s sarcasm remains mostly mute, because he knows that he cannot survive in London if he openly declares what he believes. In this section I want to discuss the ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’ traits of humour, which define who will be a part of the group and who will be left outside. In the frame of this novel I want to discuss how silent sarcasm helps the narrator to win the reader over to his side and manage to mark the metropolitan center as the deviant Other.

Henri Bergson in his famous essay “On Laughter”, which deals with the mechanics of laughter, argues that laughter is a social phenomenon and that “laughter is always the laughter of a group” (par 2). He goes on to expand on the inclusive and exclusive traits of humour, noting that laughter from within a group at an outsider strengthens the ties within, while also drawing the line of who is included in the group and who is left out. However, in London the

¹⁴ By “intentionally”, I do not mean that his country was not victimized by the imperial mission, but that he intentionally underscores his colonial past to benefit from it.

narrator has no group to laugh with, in the face of colonial adversity “so he becomes plural and partial at the same time” (Bungaro 34), being the specimen of all the blacks as if they were a singular species, a position which also becomes a reason for silent ridicule for the narrator. He becomes the object and victim of easy generalizations by the white people in London, by everyone from his doctor to his parents-in-law and his impudent students.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator’s doctor remarks in a rising crescendo that Afro-Caribbean people have dicky hearts and goes on to list all the incurable diseases on earth, like high blood pressure, hypertension, sickle-cell anemia, dementia, dengue fever, sleeping sickness, diabetes, amnesia, cholera, phlegm, melancholy and hysteria, as the sicknesses that the “blacks” are prone to have and tells him that he should not be surprised about his bugged heart because he already has bad genes (9). As was also italicized in the previous quotation we realize that the narrator copies his doctor’s attitude and directly inserts it in his stories to please Mr. Willoughby, and achieves his aim. However, not having a drop of Caribbean blood, the narrator ironically stands for all the black people regardless of their ethnic differences. In the eyes of the colonizer, Africa is one big country and all the countries are the cities that belong to it and the narrator mocks the ignorance of easy generalizations which have the power to appropriate meanings.

Despite standing for millions of black people at once, we never see the narrator in London as a part of a small diaspora. He stands as a man alone, and having no sidekick in London, his internal jokes are shared with the reader. However, as the authors of *Cheeky Fictions*, Reichl and Stein suggest, laughter at an outsider strengthens the ties within (13). They argue that laughter is subjective because what we find funny, comic and humorous might not manage to make someone else smile. However, they also note that laughter is also a social phenomenon, shaped by shared codes and values and a common world view. Consequently they characterize laughter both in terms of subjectivity and intersubjectivity (13). The narrator

aptly plays on this duality to win over his reader who can see the “backstage” of his life, which creates an alternative space for him by telling us what goes on through his mind. By sharing his silent mockery with reader while excluding the other characters from this space, the narrator decides on whom to include in his group. His necessary and dignified silence in face of the colonizer translates itself to discourse of his mind, which paradoxically never stops talking or mocking the colonizer. His motto is: “Murmur audibly, smile brightly, say nothing” (20), which we see him practice throughout the novel. At some points, *even* he admits that he uses smiling instead of words as a destabilizing tool against the subjects of the metropolitan center. When he talks about his experiences as a coloured teacher faced with all white students who seem ready to make fun of him, he remarks:

I taught some other years as well, all of them restless and tirelessly mocking. Teaching brought out a violence and anger in me I did not know I possessed. It was fear of being humiliated, of being laughed at. [...] I developed a dirty little laugh which somehow took care of them. Whenever they were in doubt, my laugh reduced them to incomprehension. (76)

It is the fear of being laughed at that makes him develop laughter as a tool of resistance that makes him respond with more laughter. The narrator, embodying the rest of the Empire, manages to laugh back, because he both feels he can do nothing else to change his situation and also because he believes he can destabilize the colonizer with comedy, if not with tragedy.

Third-Space: Writing As Home In *Admiring Silence*

As mentioned previously, the narrator’s way of dealing with his dislocation in both Zanzibar and London are his silences, silent sarcasm and writing alternative stories about his past. Gurnah in “Writing & Place” argues that the essentialist formation of history legitimizes itself in and through its own actions and that a dislocated postcolonial writer can occupy a space for his own voice by employing the space between the two realms. In his essay, he talks about his own experience of writing when he was in England and says that he realized he was writing

from memory. “Traveling away from home provides distance and perspective, and a degree of amplitude and liberation. It intensifies recollection, which is the writer's hinterland. Distance allows the writer uncluttered communion with this inner self, and the result is a freer play of the imagination” (27). This reflection is in the same line with Salman Rushdie who says that “fantasy, or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism” is a way of dealing with the problem of unbelonging (19). Gurnah believes that writing from outside the society has certain benefits in that it helps the author connect the imaginary and real sides of a story. Moreover, Gurnah asserts that distance frees the writer from all the responsibilities as a hero and a truth-seer, when he lives outside the society (27). The nameless narrator of *Admiring Silence* is also partially writing from memory, but his memories are not totally based on what is real, but what could be real, which is the freer play of imagination that Gurnah and Rushdie talk about. Harald Leusman in his “Diaspora Consciousness in Black British Literature” asserts that “the narrator uses the narratives that he invents about himself as a tool to construct a stable and coherent self while it also records emotional distresses that form potentially destructive forces for him” (231) and Felicity Hand claims that story telling helps him “to rewrite [his] own past and, perhaps more importantly, it becomes a therapeutic remedy against the displacement and alienation [he experiences] in [his] country of adoption” (1).

Much like Naipaul's Ranjit Kripalsingh, having understood that identity equals performativity, the narrator uses writing to give a sense of completeness to his life and reconstructs a unified self although it might only partially reflect who he really is. The narrator prunes the realities of his past to fit his story in colonial schemes:

And I was only too happy to oblige, to retell stories, dwell on them, elaborate. In my stories, I found myself clarifying a detail, adjusting to a variation that added irony and a note of bitterness to what might otherwise seemed banal. I found the opportunity to rewrite my history irresistible, and once I began it became easier and easier. (62)

The stories that he tells Emma and her family might have been true too. In order to please his audience, the narrator reshapes his past and transforms his identity to meet the colonial needs. However, after constantly repeating and constructing alternative stories, the narrator also starts to believe in the reality of his colonial depictions and is naturally disappointed when he sees Zanzibar after 20 years. In stark contrast to the Willoughby family, the narrator talks about identity as fluidity, because he has understood that identity is about positioning yourself in relation to other people. As we see in the later sections of the novel it is not England itself that the narrator misses when he is in Zanzibar but Emma, who forges and strengthens all the ties between him and England. In various points of the second chapter, which narrates the time when the narrator returns to Zanzibar for a brief visit, he sighs thinking how much he missed Emma, not England itself. His belonging to England is synonymous with his being with Emma, which for Fanon shows the inferiority complex of the colonized black. He says that when a white woman loves a black man she shows that he is “worthy of white love” and can be loved like a white man” (63), which is a better manhood, both positions to aspire to. Consequently, at the end, when Emma leaves him, it is not a big surprise that the narrator decides to return to Zanzibar because although he knows he does not belong either to England or to Zanzibar anymore, he feels he can help his society develop, instead of teaching unruly English students who do not respect him.

Returning to the use of silent humour, I believe that the narrative strategies of Gurnah (silences, flashbacks, mistakes, web of lies, half-truths, allegories) are also beneficial in revealing the disappointment of what I call “the irony of expectations”. It happens when the expectations of the narrator’s audience does not match with the reality of his story. As we previously discussed, the narrator views himself as a “failure” and consciously inverts alternative and imaginary stories to make his story less disappointing for his audience. However, this is not a one-sided process: the narrator lies both to his own family in Zanzibar

and Emma and her parents. The breach between his two worlds is so wide that at one point in the novel his family in Zanzibar tries to match him with a young medical Tanzanian girl because they do not know he has a girlfriend in London while he tells lies to Emma that his father is someone who is his uncle in reality, just to please her colonial curiosity. In doing this, Gurnah reveals the nameless narrator's private fears of failure and shame of rejection that he is so willing to efface while at the same time opening a space for him to exist, created by these alternative stories.

The book opens with the case of a bugged heart, then it goes back to his family in Zanzibar, then it comes forward to the time when he met Emma, then it goes back to the story of his mother's marriage, which is a story not completely true, while nor totally untrue. The narration weaves a web of the past and the present, going back and forth and intentionally intertwines the real with the imaginary in order to bring out the fictional quality of reality. Moreover, such a strategy reveals the opposing views of people in Zanzibar and London about the nameless narrator. In London the narrator is considered to be an unfulfilled, middle-class, school teacher while in Zanzibar he is considered so important that he is officially invited to the Prime Ministry to take his place in governmental duties. The Prime Minister righteously says that they need him in Zanzibar unlike in England. He is flattered by the notion of being needed because it implies superiority. However, he cannot overcome the sense of subordination that has been implanted in him in London over the last twenty years:

What did they think I could do? There must be some mistake. I'm a schoolteacher, for God's sake. I'm unfulfilled. I know that I perform this unthrilling task in the land of giants and wizards, and 24-hour porno TV channels on the cable, and the mother of parliaments and the most exciting metropolis since Nineveh, and at the heart of the Holy European Empire, but none of that makes me deserving of such expectations. (155)

He would not say this outright to the postcolonial Prime Minister, nonetheless he shares his private shame with the reader, the sympathy of whom he seeks. In London the narrator is a

subordinate, colored Third World immigrant while he is a potential hero for Zanzibar. This creates a binary which develops bitter irony between his two worlds.

However, the ultimate irony is that writing and silence are the opposites of one another and the title *Admiring Silence* adds to this irony. I believe it does not connote being unable to speak *per se*: it is the relief that arises from not speaking that our silent narrator, for there is always a private relief in not claiming agency. He can not belong anywhere, he does not have a stable identity, a home, or a family (he is abandoned at the end of the novel). In short, the nameless narrator is the best example of a life that has fallen between two cultures, families and mindsets, calling both Zanzibar and London homes, to neither of which he truly belongs. Moreover, in addition to all his lacks, he is even denied a name by the author. As Roberts points out in her book review the narrator has a valid reason to not share his name with anyone:

We start to imagine that perhaps the narrator's name is precious to him, as a sign of identity, of the goodness inside him, the self he needs to love in order to survive, so that he must not give it away or he will lose everything. The novel tracks an inner journey as well as an outer one, a quest for knowledge and dignity across self-hatred and self-disgust. Right at the end, when the narrator sits plucking up courage to telephone a woman he has met on the plane, you get the impression that he might be ready to tell her his name. (par 3)

His name is a sign of his 'real' identity, which he cannot maintain due to his ambivalent situation between two cultures. However, refraining from saying his name, he reiterates his plural-partiality in face of the colonizer, for there are many immigrants like him in London who condone assimilation and risk effacing their own culture heritage. He only starts to become less ironic when he meets someone else like him, Ira, in the plane and this is perhaps the reason the novel ends in a subtly optimistic tone now that the narrator now has an alibi in a world which refuses him.

To conclude, the ambivalent postcolonial condition is a given for the colonial subject who moves from the periphery to the center. That is the quotidian input. Sarcasm, silence and irony are the tools with which the narrator deals with his marginal position in English society. Bitter humor in this context is a tool to arrive at an end, which is to develop and sustain a fragile identity and allow him to exist in the land of “giants and wizards” as the narrator puts it (155). Gurnah’s *Admiring Silence*, like Naipaul’s *Mimic Men*, offers *writing* as the solution, the refuge in which the narrator can hide and from which he can attack. The act of writing itself is the space he can claim, that cannot be taken from him. However, it is ironic that writing is the opposite of silence.

In his interview conducted by Jonathan Rutherford, Homi Bhabha talks about the generative forces of hybridity and rebukes the so called multiculturalism that aims to control cultural diversity and assimilates identity rather than appreciating cultural difference. Bhabha talks about the necessary emergence of an area different from the “home” culture and the “other” culture in which an immigrant lives, which he calls the “third space”. Bhabha expands on the notion that the cultural differences can simply not be welcomed by being liberal because the cultures are to some extent *incommensurable* to one another: “However rational you are, or ‘rationalist’ you are [...], it is actually very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive, to try and fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can easily coexist” (209). However, he goes on to argue that there are some underlying principles and notions like symbol-forming and subject-constituting that are similar in all cultures, “because culture is a signifying or symbolic activity” (210), rather than a set of historical events. In the end he remarks that miscegenation is a myth but it is possible to negotiate identities by translation. Translation for Bhabha signifies imitation of and displacement from an original culture, which is merely a myth. By asserting “Cultures are only constituted in relation to (...) otherness internal to their own symbol-forming activity

which makes them decentered structures...” (210), Bhabha remarks that cultures need other cultures to reiterate their sense of originality. Moreover, instead of one, unified, controlled and administered multiculturalism which is foregrounded in assimilation to the dominant culture to a large extent, Bhabha offers a third space of accommodation. He says that hybridity is the third space which is productive in articulating new possibilities and the nature of hybridity is ambivalent (211), just like Edward Said rephrases Adorno in his essay “Reflections on Exile”, who says “the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing” (184). Hand expands the argument rightly to readjust it the case of the nameless narrator in the case of *Admiring Silence*:

Story-telling, the quintessential ingredient in the oral tradition, is used by Gurnah to empower his characters with a voice and therefore the means to reconstruct their own histories. He also uses the story-teller as a kind of cultural mediator, building a bridge to allow the listener/reader to cross from one culturescape to another. (4)

Writing is the point where the gap between reality and fiction meet. Writing alleviates the sores, bridges the gaps and becomes a space in which the narrator can say what he wants to say, to resist, but make it mute at the same time. The narrator of the book is mute but smiles ambivalently, both at his own helplessness and at the colonizer’s stiffness and ignorance. He smiles and refrains from speaking, but he employs figures of speech like the allegory of blocked toilets in Zanzibar, metonymy of a buggered heart for his life as a failure, ironies of “translation” projects, euphemisms like “contemporary” for imitating the Western culture and “sponsorship” and “funding” for openly begging money from the Western societies, to speak for that which he is too scared to utter . To give examples, when the narrator is in the island of Zanzibar, the Permanent Secretary Amur Malik tells him about their project of translation of Western classics to their language because they hope to get money from international monetary funds with the project. The situation is ironic in that Malik does not invest in creating anything specific to his culture but wants to translate the classics which he confuses

as “contemporary” (150-152). In another instance in Zanzibar the narrator is told that instead of building new constructions to the island the government decides to renovate the old colonial hotel and restore the European quarter in the island to get money from the colonizers. Amur Malik says: “We’re confident that UNESCO will sponsor [the project]” and adds: “There is nothing tougher than attracting international sponsorship” (149-150). All these instances are exemplary of why Gurnah leaves the narrator without a name: he stands for the millions ashamed of who they have become at the end of the assimilation process. I think all this add to the element of silent speech, which speaks volumes undercover.

As far as *Admiring Silence* is concerned, I think the *act of writing* is the narrator’s third space: it orders and constructs realities while at the same time blurring the lines between reality and fiction. Around the beginning of the novel, Gurnah informs the reader that what we read might or might not be true: “Sooner or later I am going to go back to the beginning and tell this story properly. I can’t quite fix on the beginning yet, where it is as such” (17). Moreover, he stands at the vantage point of a vagabond to both the societies neither of which he belongs to. Gurnah underscores the fact that everyday hybridity is a myth: no matter how much the ethnic pieces might seem concordant with one another, there is nothing essential that keeps them together apart from fiction, the third space which he is more than willing to use and stretch. However, he also knows that there are some traits of cultures that are mutually unintelligible and at the end decides to take lessons in London to go back to Zanzibar to unclog toilets, and help the future generations not to have to resort to this excremental allegory when they talk about their country, nor resort to alternative strategies to make themselves heard.

CHAPTER 4

DEHISTORICIZING HUMOUR IN *WHITE TEETH*

“It makes no difference whether you are being watched by Allah,
Jesus, Buddha, or whether you are not. On cold days a man can see
his breath, on a hot day he can't. On both occasions, the man breathes.”
Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*

Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth*, the winner of several major literary prizes, has been considered a celebration of multicultural London. Smith treats the issue of identity with humour by placing together a microcosm of multiracial characters, all of who are in a quest of a stable identity (Squires 8). Published at the turn of the century, this lengthy novel of over 500 pages, addresses a multiplicity of themes associated with ethnic diversity, colonial legacy and everyday hybridity in post-imperial London. By placing a multicultural set of characters, interrelated to each other with ties of history, in multiple time frames and with a multilayered narrative, Zadie Smith aims to illustrate a lively image of the multicultural daily life in London.

As many critics have marked, there are notable similarities between Zadie Smith's life and her characters in *White Teeth*, especially in the setting of the novel -Willesden-and in the character Irie Jones, who shares the same demographics as the biracial Smith (Squires 9). Although Smith remarks that it is not possible to superimpose her life on her characters, she admits: “When you come from a mixed-race family, it makes you think a bit harder about inheritance and what's passed on from generation to generation” (qtd. in Squires 9). Born to a Jamaican mother and an English father in Northwest London in 1975, Sadie Smith changed

her name to “Zadie Smith” in her adolescence (9). At the age of 18, she enrolled in King’s College in Cambridge University to study English Literature, where she “published stories in the ‘May Anthologies’ (collections of Cambridge and Oxford student writing)” (11). In 1997 Smith sold the copyrights of her first two novels for approximately £250,000 and became famous even before *White Teeth* claimed its place in the literary scene in 2000 (14). In 2002, *White Teeth* was adapted to a mini drama series by BBC (Walters 213).

A very brief history of London’s transformation from an imperial to multiethnic capital will help us to contextualize the complex issues pertaining to cultural identity in *White Teeth*. As far as London’s emergence as a ‘multicultural and multiethnic’ city is concerned, Tariq Modood and Richard Berthoud explain in *Ethnic Minorities in Britain: Diversity and Disadvantage* that “Britain and especially London, the former centre of the Empire, became multicultural mainly by the arrival of immigrants who left their countries, mostly for political demographic or economic reasons, in search for freedom and better standard of living” (qtd. in Hadjetian 14). Because the colonized periphery already had a relationship with the metropolitan center, they immigrated to London to avoid political suppression, poverty and bad working conditions and sought religious and political freedom as well as prosperity (14). On the other hand, from the 1950s on Britain welcomed workers from “underemployed and overpopulated Commonwealth countries” because they were simply short of labour after World War II, and “they needed to rebuild the war-shattered economy” (14). This major demographic shift within the Empire resulted in the immigrants’ being less than welcomed by the British population because now the ‘center’ and the ‘margin’ were getting closer than ever. However, they slowly started to merge with the group they considered to be subordinate to themselves; the immigrants’ influence pushed the British culture to redefine their national identity, which is still an ongoing process (15). As a result, the self-image and the cultural

identity of the British , of which they were so proud, became more and more fragmented and problematic.

This is the cultural setting of Smith's novel, which follows three generations of three multiethnic families, the Joneses, the Iqbals and the Chalfens, in their quest for answers to the unanswerable questions of origins and what constitutes 'real' Englishness in today's London. Through the employment of the omniscient narrator with a comic lens, *White Teeth* problematizes the established racial and social categories as constituents of identity, and demonstrates new possibilities of a hybrid identity in multiethnic London . Unlike Naipaul and Gurnah, Smith is not partial to any race or ethnic group in her humour¹⁵, which lays the grounds for comparison between the three writers: from WASPs to Bengali Muslims, nobody in North London escapes the humorous treatment of Smith. Throughout the book Smith does not take any character too seriously, and thus any character who takes himself/herself too seriously is automatically ridiculed. About her humorous treatment of fundamentalism, Smith says in an interview: "Anybody who is completely sure of themselves in *White Teeth* doesn't do very well" (Nasta 271).

In this chapter, I will again analyze the relationship between cultural identity and humour and discuss how Smith ruptures the aforementioned essentialist views of identity by dealing with everyday hybridity in a humorous tone. Since the volume of the novel will not allow a comprehensive inspection of all the themes and characters, I have selected the set of events and characters that reveal Smith's agenda that underpins her views on cultural identity most blatantly. After discussing the relationship between history and humour in *White Teeth*, I will briefly compare and contrast the uses of humour in *White Teeth*, *Admiring Silence* and *The*

¹⁵ In his essay "Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: Multiculturalism for the Millennium" Dominic Head remarks that with its embracing heterogeneity, *White Teeth* broke a repetitive pattern of the post-colonial migrant experience, which is "haunted by a sense of social failure" by the characters who are "always vulnerable and often embattled. (107) His examples of the latter are the works of Sem Selvon and V.S. Naipaul. He goes on to argue that this is partially due to Smith being a third generation in post-war Black British experience (107).

Mimic Men in terms of Abdul JanMohamed's "specular" and "syncretic" border intellectuals. Throughout this chapter the use of "history" will be synonymous with the concepts of "determinism", "fundamentalism", "essentialism" and "fixity", while "hybridity" will connote "transformation", "chance" and "contingency".

Championing Historical Contingency over Determinism

"What is past is prologue" (Smith i). As Jonathan Sell notes in "Chance and Gesture in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*: A Model for Multicultural Identity?" this quote is the opening epigraph of *White Teeth* (29). Taken from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, I think it underlines the fact that the novel will deal with nothing other than the historical reality that resulted in today's hybrid England, i.e. its colonial history (29). Sell righteously argues that the novel ruptures the bonds with the "conventional postcolonial hung-ups. Announcing a break with the past, it heralds a fresh concern for a present disembarassed of all complexes about historically determined origins and identities" (29). Smith does not merely view the past to be temporally isolated from the present but on the contrary puts the past in dialogue with the present events. Therefore, what is past -colonialism-becomes a prologue for the new stories Smith will narrate in the next pages. Smith both attaches and detaches herself from the past by paying homage to it and moving on from it: "By slipping the bonds of causality, by emancipating herself from historical determinism, and by fixing her eyes on the present, Smith is able to inscribe identities which are no longer hung-up on historical injustices or immersed in sombre, unproductive introspection" (33).

White Teeth deconstructs the traditional notions of identity by denouncing genealogy as a stable grounding for the concept of identity and instead offers hybrid representations of identity, which are shaped by personal histories and current circumstances. In his essay "Chance and Gesture in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*: A Model for

Multicultural Identity?” Jonathan Sell notes that cultural identity rests on the assumptions that “a) identity is historically determined, b) consubstantial with pigmentation, or the culture which a particular skin colouring might metonymically stand for; and c) stable enough to be defined and recognized as an object to crave or to flee” (31). This distinction of cultural identity is helpful in contextualizing what Smith tries to destabilize in *White Teeth*. In order to be able to talk about everyday hybridity, Smith primordially calls into question history as a valid base for the formation of cultural identity. I believe that this is also the same reason she chose to name her novel *White Teeth*, and makes constant references to dental issues throughout the novel. After all, teeth are the most durable parts of the human skeleton and Smith metonymically makes a reference to history in her chapter titles like “Teething Trouble”, “The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones”, “The Root Canals of Mangal Pande”, “The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden”, “Canines: The Ripping Teeth” when unfolding the histories of her characters (Bentley 55). By using history itself to dehistoricize what the characters assume to be facts, Smith demonstrates the incongruity between appearance and reality, which provides the comic effect most prominently throughout the novel.

In Chapter 1, I tried to analyze Hayden White’s notions of history being made up out of a certain set of events, and noted that narration combines the elements of the “real” and the “imaginative” sides of a history to make it coherent. In relation to Naipaul, I argued that Ralph Singh’s distinct arrangement of the past reveals the ironies that he tries to hide. In a similar manner, I want to discuss Smith’s favoring of historical contingency as a trope of humour in *White Teeth* in terms of Hayden White’s notion of emplotment in “Historical Text as Literary Artifact”. White argues that historical facts are value neutral by themselves and that history making is a process of encoding and decoding pieces of information (403). He asserts that histories “are not only about events but also about the possible sets of

relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure[...] The data that are to be analyzed are not significantly different in the different accounts. What is different are the modalities of their relationships” (403-5). He sets out to demonstrate that a certain set of chronological events “*a, b, c, d, e.....n,*” requires description and characterization as elements of plot to give them meaning. Thus with different emplotments -like “*A,b,c,d,e.....n,*”, “*a,B,c,d,e,.....n*”, “*a,b,C,d,e,.....n,*”, “*a,b,c,D.....n,*” -and privileging certain information over the others, we create different stories (403). I find White’s notions of historical contingency relevant to Zadie Smith’s ridicule of hegemonic history, which is used as a tool of domination by the metropolitan subjects to legitimize their superiority over the colonized. The contingency and fictionality of history is the starting point of Zadie Smith’s humour. With the help of a multilayered narrative that weaves a web around the characters, Smith’s fair narrator lets her characters reveal their opposing views on what they assume to be facts. This approach problematizes history as a solid ground on which to base identity because their history might actually be different in reality.

In order to contextualize Smith’s light-hearted mockery of historical and religious fundamentalism, I want to discuss Zadie Smith’s treatment of the Bengali Muslim Samad Iqbal, who is the epitome of not only religious but also social conservatism in the novel. Samad’s world vision is guided by the principles of Islam and the legacy of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande. He becomes an easy target to caricature for Smith because of his obsession with Islam and his allegedly pure Bangladeshi roots. In face of a potential ‘danger’ against his religion, the caricature Samad talks in stock phrases like “To the pure all things are pure. To the pure all things are pure. To the pure all things are pure. Can't say fairer than that. Can't say fairer than that. Can't say fairer than that” (137). In such moments, Smith’s omniscient narrator intervenes to reveal that religious purity, like cultural purity, is an ideal by mocking his ways of suppressing his real feelings: “he had learnt these [two phrases] in the

past ten years in England, words he hoped could protect him from the abominable heat in his trousers” (137), which she knows will not. His rigid religious beliefs are easily forgotten when he has sexual intercourses with the music teacher, who is after all a *kafir*. Moreover, Smith pairs Samad with the sharp-tongued Alsana, who stops talking to him directly, after he ruthlessly sends away her son Magid to Bangladesh. “Maybe yes, Samad Miah, maybe no” (289) becomes the trademark of her answers Samad’s questions. In contrast to his rigidity, Alsana’s indeterminate answers infuriate Samad, which provides humour for the reader.

Apart from his religious conservatism, Samad is fascinated by the glorious legacy of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande, who is a historically authentic figure and started the first Indian mutiny against British rule in India in 1857 (König 4). Pande is considered to be the person who “incited his fellow Indian soldiers in the East India Company’s army that rebelled against the British in 1857” (5). Throughout the novel Samad seeks Pande’s recognition in his environment because he believes this will grant him the appreciation that is denied to him as a Muslim Bengali waiter in London: “My great-grandfather Mangal Pande –he looked around for the recognition the name deserved but, being met only with blank pancake English faces, he continued – was the great hero of the Indian Mutiny!” (87). He identifies himself with Pande because he views Pande to be a historically significant figure while other characters in the book, including his wife Alsana and his best friend Archie, denounce Pande’s importance in Indian history. Archie considers Pande’s story to be a source of laughter: “Go on Sam. [...] Give us the one about Mangal Pande. That’s always good for a laugh” (225). Moreover about Pande’s historical importance, Alsana remarks: “Big fat nonsense. Every fool knows Gandhi gee is the big cheese. Or Nehru. Or maybe Akbar [...]” (226). Every historical resource apart from the one his nephew Ranju finds portrays Pande to be an insignificant coward and traitor (König 7). In this and many other instances, Smith both talks about past as reality and fiction, and as something essential while she is well aware of its contingency. Smith comments in

various parts of the book that “every moment happens twice: inside and outside, and they are two different histories” (532). In the case of Mangal Pande, history does happen inside and outside: For Samad he is the pioneer of Indian freedom while for Archie he started the revolution just a bit too early and caused the mass destruction of Indian army because of his miscalculated time arrangement. As White asserts, the information on Pande is the same, but the approach to the set of events make two different histories from a single chronological event, which underpins Smith’s devaluation of history as a pillar of identity. Placing historical contingency over determinism ensures humour and deconstructs the established notions of cultural identity. Apart from the debasement of his great-grandfather Pande’s legacy, Samad’s surname, one of another historical tie for him, has unfortunately become a matter of quotidian ridicule in London: instead of Iqbal, people call him Ick-ball, which is an exclamation of ridicule and repulsion.

Smith lets Samad struggle between what Said calls filiations and affiliations in his essay “The World, The Text and the Critic”. According to Said, filiations are inherited by birth and affiliations are gained by the culture that people are surrounded with. Filiation is essential while affiliations can change for every person and more importantly, sometimes affiliations create filiations in their own forms (22). Although the thought of a hybrid identity is inadmissible for Samad, he is evidently stuck between filiations and affiliations. When he sees that filiations (religious and cultural fundamentalism) can easily be replaced by affiliations (religious dogmatism adulterated by carnal pleasures), he can not make sense of his world anymore. Moreover, his belief in “oneness and unity” is shattered by his sons constantly. For instance, after he sends Magid away, he expects his son to become a good Muslim, but letters from Magid prophesy that his project is bound to fail: “We must be more like the English. The English fight fate to death” (288), Samad is infuriated and shouts at Alsana, who tries to defend her son: “And don’t speak to me of second generation! *One*

generation! Indivisible! Eternal!” (289 my emphasis). Due to his devotion to the rigid constrictions of Islam, Samad is the one that suffers most openly from not being able to transform his identity, however neither can he leave the culture that he assumes is corrupting his family. In face of all the adversities, he breaks down and narrates one of the most famous passages of the novel:

These days, it feels to me that you make a devil’s pact when you walk into this country. You hand your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, get yourself started... but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? Cold, wet, miserable; terrible food, dreadful newspapers-who would want to stay? In a place where you are not welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house-trained. Who would want to stay? But you have made a devil’s pact... it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere. (407)

Who would want to stay? No matter how much he regrets it, Samad does. Although he would not believe it, he is also shaped by the affiliations around him. After he gets involved in an affair, Samad decides to send one of the twins to India, to soothe his guilty conscious: “The further Samad himself floated out to sea, pulled down to the depths by a siren named Poppy Burt-Jones, the more determined he became to create for his boys roots on shore, deep roots that no storm or gale could displace” (193). This hypocritical gesture to keep at least one child “pure” and close to his roots, bounces back to Samad in the worst way possible: Millat develops into the complete opposite of what his father had envisioned, which is the ultimate irony in the book. As Sell also remarks,

Smith quietly discredits the metaphysics of Samad, who sends Magid to Bangladesh in the hope that contact with his roots and immersion in Muslim culture will make of him a true Muslim. On the contrary, Magid returns a true Englishman, whereas Millat, Samad’s other son, who stays in England, is transformed into a militant Muslim. (30)

In this and many other instances, Smith reveals the incongruities of all her characters through humour. Having struggled between two cultures herself, Smith’s humour refrains from being judgmental about the incongruous actions of her characters and excuses their cultural prejudices and stereotypes as marks of their inherent credulity on the issue of cultural identity.

All the characters, including the WASPs, are primarily concerned with belonging to a group they assume to be better than theirs. In the hybrid makeup of their surroundings, they dash from one belief or group to another, to merge with an established group, all of which are obviously futile efforts. Apart from the humorous portrayal of Samad, all of Smith's cast in the novel misunderstand the ramifications of cultural identity, since all of them mistake identity for an idyllic "purity" which does not exist: for Millat this is the radical Islamist KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation – a name Smith intentionally creates with an "acronym problem"), for Magid it is positive science, for Chalfens it is -of course-themselves, for Joshua it is FATE (Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation) while for Irie it is Chalfens' "pure" Englishness. Yet, all these futile attempts bear their irony within: Millat sides with KEVIN but models his radical Muslim character on Western actors like Liotta and Pacino (who are not even gangsters themselves); Magid, who is sent to India to keep his cultural purity becomes English than English; the Chalfens's racial purity turns out to be mixed Polish and German blood; Samad, despite his religious stance, cheats on his wife with his children's music teacher; Joshua, whose father experiments on animals, supports FATE and becomes a defender of animal rights; and Irie, who is already half English, envies Chalfens's allegedly pure roots, which do not turn out to be so pure in the end. Shortly speaking, Smith not only lets all the characters stereotype themselves but also the characters they want to imitate which downsizes them into caricatures and reveals their ignorance. With humour Smith "points to the inappropriateness of essentialist versions of cultural identity and acts as an exceptionally fitting mode for the representation of the transcultural make-up of many British identities, identifying incongruities in stereotypes without sidelining them entirely" (Knopp72). As mentioned previously, Smith is not partial to any ethnic group when she pokes fun at their illogical practices of cultural and religious essentialism. "Smith [...]"

does not abide by political correctness and has her narrator mock the peculiarities of both of white British mainstream and of minority cultures” (Knopp 67).

After analyzing the Bengali Samad, I think it is necessary to examine how Smith deals with the “pure” English, the Chalfens, which will help to underpin Smith’s devaluation of history as a constituent of identity. In terms of plot, Magid and Irie are sent to Joshua’s house for the purposes of punishment and rehabilitation after they are caught smoking weed with Joshua in the school. Smith introduces the Chalfen family halfway through the novel with a tone that mocks their self-assurance:

They referred to themselves as nouns, verbs and occasionally adjectives: It's the Chalfen way, And then he came out with a real Chalfenism, He's Chalfening again, We need to be a bit more Chalfenist about this. Joyce challenged anyone to show her a happier family, a more Chalfenist family than theirs. (314)

In this paragraph, the root of the word “Chalfen” can be replaced with “elitism”. In the encounter of the Chalfens and Millat and Irie, Smith lets the prejudices and stereotypes of both sides govern their vision of each other. The outcome seems to be a carbon copy of postcolonial theory superimposed on daily life: the colonizer Chalfens are fascinated by the lesser human beings, ‘the brown strangers’ who admire them and want to be like them. However, this is not a one way street: The colonizers’ superior position is secure so long as they are able to sustain their darker audience, and this is exactly why Mrs. Chalfen welcomes Irie and Millat in her house.

In return, Irie “want[s] their Englishness. Their Chalfishness. The *purity* of it. It [does] not occur to her that the Chalfens [are], after a fashion, immigrants too (third generation, by way of Germany and Poland, née Chalfenovsky¹⁶) or that they might be as needy of her as she was of them” (Smith 328). About Mrs. Chalfen, Smith makes a humorous comment: “She needed to be needed. She'd be the first to admit it. She hated it, [...] when one after the other her

¹⁶ Knopp remarks that such instances “show the absurdity of notions of an authentic cultural or ethnic origin and identity in a society that has always experienced migration” (70).

children, [...] finally kicked the habit. She usually stretched it to two or three years, and, in the case of Joshua, four, but though the supply never ended, the demand did” (315). To Irie, “the Chalfens were more English than the English” (328), while Millat just “[sees] money, lazy money, money that [is] just hanging around this family” (322). For the Chalfens, Irie and Millat are no different from the animal FutureMouse® or a tree: “Nurture, thought Joyce. Be patient, water regularly and don’t lose your temper when pruning” (323). Whereas the Chalfens believe in the essential goodness granted by genetics, paradoxically, they believe that by nature people can be salvaged. Their predetermined perfection is brought down to earth by their son Joshua, a topic which I will discuss in the later sections of the chapter.

However, not to fall into the trap of overgeneralizing the attitude of the metropolitan subjects in the novel, Smith cleverly places the chief protagonist Archie Jones, who, despite being an example of the majority, is nonchalant about the issues of identity (Sell 29). Archie’s life is governed by the arbitrariness of the question: “Heads or tails?”. At the beginning of the novel, when he decides to commit suicide, he leaves the last decision to the flip of the coin and : “Solemnly he flipped a coin (heads, life, tails, death) and felt nothing in particular when he found himself staring at the dancing lion” (11). In another instance, when he starts discussing a neighborhood issue, he concludes: “Look, let’s not argue. Let’s flip a coin; heads it stays, tails ...” (53).

Predeterminism versus chance (the former denoting historic essentialism while the latter contingency) is one of the prominent themes in the book and I believe it is best exemplified by the twin brothers Millat and Magid. As mentioned previously, Samad made *Sophie’s Choice* when he decided to keep his rascal son Millat in London to let him get corrupt (because he was the bad child anyway) while he sent the studious Magid to India in the hope that this son would retain his cultural ‘purity’. The ultimate irony in the book is that Millat becomes a zealous supporter of an extremist Islamic organization named KEVIN in London,

while Millat indulges in positive science with Mr. Chalfen on a genetically modified mouse in Bangladesh, becoming more English than the English. The twins might be going in opposite directions, however, the underlying reason for their choice is the same: both the twins attempt to relate to the past by belonging to a group.

In Samad's choice of sending the son to Bangladesh, Magid was the victim of fate and as a child he could not do anything to change it. This is the underlying reason for his devotion to the FutureMouse® project, everything about which is measured and mapped out. There is no room for chance or randomness in that genetically modified creature, which is destined to perform predetermined duties and live seven years: "The FutureMouse® holds out the tantalizing promise of a new phase in human history where we are not victims of the random but instead directors and arbitrators of our own fate" (433). Apart from the mouse experiment, the 'English' Magid becomes an atheist who reads Adam Smith and E.M. Forster, wears bow-ties, irons even his underwear and brushes his teeth 6 times a day to show how well he belongs to the metropolitan white majority (424).

On the other hand, despite having been brought up in 'corrupt' London, Millat tries to attain 'purity' by living in accordance with the four main Islamic criteria of KEVIN: "Being ascetic in habits, remembering the glory of Muhammed and the might of the Creator, grasping a full intellectual understanding of KEVIN and the Qur'an, purging oneself of the taint of the West" (444). While these rules alone are ridiculous enough, they are slightly moderated and twisted by Millat to cater to his own needs, which increases humour:

In the first three areas he was doing fine. [...] He no longer saw Alexandra Andrusier, Polly Houghton or Rosie Dew (though he paid occasional visits to Tanya Chapman-Jones, a very small redhead who understood the delicate nature of his dilemma and would give him a thorough blow job without requiring Millat to touch her at all). (444)

This is the extent of Millat unconscious hypocrisy: he thinks ejaculating with no actual participation on his behalf equals being ascetic. His gullibility about the subject reveals the fact that he does not really know what religious extremism or asceticism really entail.

Helga Ramsey-Kurz discusses in her essay “Humoring the Terrorists or the Terrorised? Militant Muslims in Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith and Hanif Kureishi”, that Zadie Smith shows so many incongruities and ambiguities in Millat’s multiplicity of identities that the possible catastrophe of his assassination of Magid ceases to be a dangerous outcome (78). Smith portrays Millat as a tough gangster, but simultaneously mocks his imitative utterance: “As far as I can remember, I always wanted to be a Muslim” (446), which is a phrase converted from one of Ray Liotta’s lines: “As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster” (446). The irony is that the icons of the militant Muslim Millat are not religious figures at all but the actors from gangster movies, like Pacino, Liotta and Brando (445), who are not even mafia themselves but merely actors in mafia movies. He is incompetent as a terrorist because he is there for the wrong reasons: he does not really want to hurt anyone, and he becomes a coward when he actually holds the gun in the last scene of the book where he decides to kill his brother Millat on grounds that he is defying God with his mouse. Ramsey-Kurtz focuses on Smith’s omniscient narrator who reveals the irony of Millat’s situation: “Of course, now that he’s here, now that he is stoned and *scared*, it doesn’t feel so easy, and the right-hand side of his jacket feels like someone put a fucking cartoon anvil there,’ the narrative offers ‘now that he sees the great difference between TV and life, and it kicks him right in the groin’” (78). The seemingly dauntless Millat is ridiculed by Smith’s narrative twist. Eva Knopp writes in her essay “There Are No Jokes In Paradise: Humour as a Politics of Representation in Recent Texts and Films from the British Migratory Contact Zone” that Smith’s choice of narrative perspective,

appropriates characteristics of a particularly English comic tradition when introducing her readers to an omniscient narrator whose garrulous and digressive

comments is highly reminiscent of the narrator of Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the latter often being regarded as the prototypical comic novel in English. With the help of digressions, this narrator allies herself with the reader in order to out-group a given character or a group of characters so as to deride them. (66-67)

When the characters take their fundamentals too seriously, Smith's omniscient narrator intervenes to reveal their incompetency, cowardice or gullibility concerning their mission, and out-groups them from the group they want to join. Thanks to the omniscient narrator, the reader does not take Millat's terroristic attempts too seriously, because we are provided with the information that Millat is a coward who models his character not on the prophet Mohammed or another religious figure, but on figures from television, and are further convinced of the fact that Millat is essentially a harmless character.

In short, both Magid and Millat devote themselves to a cause to belong and both fail in some way because they mistake identity for 'over' belonging to a group. They continue trying because they fail to understand that emulating the practices of their admired group will not provide them with cultural authenticity they seek. By belonging excessively, Millat and Magid both think they will overcome the sense of rootlessness, but at the end Magid's FutureMouse® runs away and Millat's KEVIN fails to perform the mission they set out to leaving both young men empty handed in their quest for belonging. Smith ensures that identity cannot be pre-determined and measured by certain criteria: chance will always win over determinism, as the FutureMouse® symbolically shows by escaping from the scene at the end of the novel (542).

The conflict of culture versus nature can be seen in the other second generation children of the book, Irie and Joshua Chalfen, both of whom have 'pure' English blood of some sort. Nonetheless, Smith portrays these characters to demonstrate that there are some issues more important to new generation than just 'pure' English blood. The case of Irie Jones is curious in that she is actually half 'pure' but she feels the most out-grouped among the whole second-generation cast. About Irie, Smith remarks: "There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there

was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a strange land” (266). Although she is half English, she feels like a vagabond in her homeland because of her dark skin colour and voluminous hair, which demonstrates that colour pigments are more significant than blood in terms of group formation, and underlines the fact that measuring identity in either trait is ridiculous. With Irie, Smith demonstrates that appearance is at least as important as history. As revealed in the chapter “The Miseducation of Irie Jones”, the essentials of Irie’s education go wrong, which causes ambiguities in her character; on the one hand she envies the Chalfens for their unadulterated roots while in contrast she is enamoured of Magid for belonging nowhere (269). Despite being born in England, she dreams of an imaginary place where there are no historical hierarchies:

No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs-this is how, Irie imagined her homeland. Because *homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn* and *soul* and *infinity* that have now passed into the language. And the particular magic of *homeland*, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginningest of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page. (Smith 402)

If there is one case more ironic than Irie’s, then it is that of Joshua Chalfen, who turns against his ‘perfect’ Chalfen heritage and joins an animal rights support foundation to protest against his father’s FutureMouse® project. Joshua’s reveals that even if “pure” identity existed, it would not necessarily be favoured: the novel posits that inter-generational problems might have more significant impacts than interracial issues. The son of a fundamentalist Muslim turns to science, the son of a scientist who experiments on mice becomes an animal rights defender. By all means, all the second generation refuses to play the part that their parents find suitable for them.

Through Joshua Chalfen and the second-generation cast, Zadie Smith demonstrates that regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, people will always think the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. This destabilizes the significance attributed to the historical binary

that reinforces feelings of superiority for the colonizers in a traditional understanding of identity, and places the argument of cultural identity on a new axis. For Smith “the rule of the Other” governs interpersonal relationships rather than the envy of white supremacy in the multiethnic London. After the failure of Joshua’s attempts to belong, it becomes evident that the project of cultural purity is doomed to fail, and the omniscient narrator comments:

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O’Rouke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks. It is only this late in the day, and possibly only in Willesden that you can find best friends Sita and Sharon, constantly mistaken for each other because Sita is white (her mother liked the name) and Sharon is Pakistani (her mother thought it best-less trouble). (Smith 327)

By combining names and surnames of different ethnic origin, Smith demonstrates that the immigrant experience resulted in inevitable hybridization of the roots and that it is possible to be multiethnic and harmonious at the same time. Moss remarks: “The everyday act of playing in a playground reflects the everydayness of the racial and cultural hybridity signalled in the children's names” (14). Although her views of multiethnicity is found too optimistic, Smith justifies herself by saying that she extracted her material from her daily surroundings in London: “I wasn’t trying to write a novel about race. I was trying to write about the country I live in. Race is obviously a part of the book, but I didn’t sit down to write a book about race” (qtd. in Hadjetian 7).

Apart from destabilizing history as a pillar of metropolitan identity, Smith takes advantage of incongruous juxtapositions to ensure that the issue of cultural identity in the novel is dealt with in less than a serious manner. By juxtaposing the serious and important events with the trivial and minor, Smith automatically ridicules the characters who take themselves too seriously. For instance, Irie mocks Mr. Chalfen’s untidiness by remarking that he should be tidier if he wants to rule the world: "You need more dividers,"[...] And a lot of the paper

you're using is A3, a 2 or irregular. [...]I'm serious. I don't know how you work like that. My school shit is better organized, and I'm not in the business of World Domination" (342), while Alsana shamelessly compares the myth of pure identity with a Hoover bag: "You go 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!" (236). Moreover Smith herself uses "teeth" as an extended metaphor for historical essentialism. In short, Smith takes the important issues of postcolonialism like "roots, history, domination" and juxtaposes them with unimportant things (like satchels and vacuum cleaner's bags) to dismantle the historical importance attached to these issues. In "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" essay, Bakhtin explains that "The process of parodying forces us to experience those sides of the object that are not otherwise included in a given genre or a given style. Parodic-travesty literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer and more fundamental [...]" (136). Zadie Smith's strategy is similar to Bakhtin's parodic-travesty literature in that she also parodies the sacred –the issue of identity– with the mundane things like a school bag (136).

To conclude, Smith makes sure that she is in touch with the essentials of colonial history, while on the other hand she mocks the notion that history is a necessary constituent of identity formation. The omniscient narrator of Zadie Smith favours everyday hybridity over having a certain group identity. "*White Teeth* proclaims a declaration of independence not only from the haunting and constraining memory of the war's catastrophes and racist oppression, but from the very idea of belonging" (Lassner 193). In this predilection, Smith does not disrespect the natal roots of her characters, neither does she overlook the issues arising from having ethnicities other than 'pure' British but with the use of humour, reveals a great deal of optimism in the transformation of multiracial London from a polarized to a harmonious

population that accepts ethnic diversity. In this frame, humour can be considered to be a device which destabilizes the importance attributed to history and deconstructs the hierarchy that creates a binary opposition between the West and the rest. “Humour in its various guises provides a platform for the negotiation and transgression of cultural identities and may thus function as a way of explicitly fighting dominant, mainly white discourses of ‘Britishness’” (Knopp 60).

Moreover, Smith’s narrative strategies of employing an omniscient narrator and travestying the serious with the comic ensure the humorous tone in the novel. She lets the characters take themselves seriously, but employing an all-seeing narrator, Smith has the upper hand to poke fun at the characters. Smith is generous in introducing misfortunes to all sides, thereby eliminating the binary between the colonizer and the colonized. By employing a comic lens throughout, Smith makes sure that the readers are sympathetic to all her cast of characters from bigots to terrorists, purists to elitists and fundamentalists: her elitists are clumsy and her terrorists are less than scary. Their fundamentalism and bigotry are portrayed to be essentially harmless.

Border Intellectuals and Cultural Identity

I would like to conclude this chapter with a comparison of the three authors in this study by discussing their position in the border between their host and home cultures. The famous postcolonial critic Abdul JanMohamed argues in “Worldliness-without-World, Homelessness-as-Home: Toward a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual” that the displaced intellectuals cannot be categorized “as self/other, center/periphery, provincial/ metropol, homo/heterosexual” but through their distinct qualities of border crossing (Rajan 81). He notes that when defining the role of the border (immigrant) intellectual, the mode of border crossing “elucidates the politics of cultural construction of subjects” (JanMohamed 99). In making this distinction between syncretic and specular border intellectuals JanMohamed

focuses on the immigrant intellectuals' perception of themselves and the others in their host countries. He argues that the syncretic border intellectual feels "at home" in both cultures and fills the gaps between them (114). He remarks:

The syncretic intellectual, more "at home" in both cultures than his or her specular counterpart, is able to combine elements of the two cultures in order to articulate new syncretic forms and experiences [...] By contrast, the specular border intellectual, while perhaps equally familiar with two cultures, finds himself or herself unable or unwilling to be "at home" in these societies. Caught between several cultures or groups, none of which are deemed sufficiently enabling or productive, the specular intellectual subjects the cultures to analytic scrutiny rather than combining them; he or she utilizes his or her interstitial culture space as a vantage point from which to define, implicitly or explicitly, other, utopian possibilities of group formation. (99)

This distinction between different kinds of border intellectuals helps one place the debates of identity and belonging on an entirely new axis. As Gita Rajan notes, the discussion of immigrant identity politics should move away from the trope of diaspora, in which the subject tightens bonds with other members of the diasporic community, in "a nationalist impulse to remain local and provincial" (81), and move toward the acknowledgement of different type of border intellectuals with new definitions.

Having marked this distinction, I want to examine this notion in the cases of Zadie Smith, Abdulrazak Gurnah and V.S. Naipaul, which will place their uses of humour in a referential framework. Although since Barthes we killed the author¹⁷, I believe that it is not possible to study postcolonial immigrant literature without any references to their authors because their life story inevitably intervenes in their perception of life and in their novels. In this respect, I believe that Zadie Smith functions as the "syncretic" border intellectual while Abdulrazak Gurnah and V.S. Naipaul occupy the "specular" site of this distinction.

¹⁷ In his notorious essay "The Death of the Author", Roland Barthes denounces the typical approach of "the man and his work" in literary criticism. In this essay "Barthes argues that effective, productive and engaged reading of a text depends on the suspension of the preconceived ideas about the character of the particular author" (Leitch et al. 1459).

I would place Abdulrazak Gurnah and V.S. Naipaul under the category of “specular” intellectuals with regards to the way they view the ambivalence between their home and host cultures. Unlike Zadie Smith, neither Naipaul nor Gurnah can directly criticize or poke fun at the colonizer. Their criticism is always hidden under guises of mimicry or sarcasm. This is due to their felt subordination in the host culture, but they do not feel at “home” in their home countries either. As was discussed in the previous chapters, the act of writing is their most significant tool to order and reshape their past and present experiences. Instead of remaining inside either culture they choose to remain outside and occupy the alternative space of writing which provides the vantage point from which they address the postcolonial immigrant’s issues associated with identity, belonging and group formation.

On the other hand, as I tried to analyze throughout this chapter, Zadie Smith remains equidistant to all her characters and pokes fun at all her characters in equal measure. I believe that Zadie Smith’s confidence about her position in the multicultural London is, to a certain extent, due to her half British heritage and being born and bred in that cultural makeup. Like Naipaul and Gurnah, Smith also works with different kinds of gaps (such as generation, narrative and historical gaps). However, instead of using gaps to point at separation, her humour aims to bridge gaps between the different ethnicities to renegotiate identities. By spinning a web of mutually dependent relationships, Smith irons out the characters’ differences and reveals their sameness with respect to their never-ending search of a group identity.

Smith’s employment of humour is neither defensive nor subversive: it just shows the humanity’s unavoidable foibles in a lighthearted manner. Smith’s humour is neither mimetic like Naipaul, nor sarcastic and self-defensive like Gurnah. Rather, it is provocative and entertaining, serving to level up all the characters in their endeavours,

little daily chores, and petit crimes. It demonstrates that nobody is without some kind of fault or blame. Smith's humour does not seek to destabilize the power of the center *per se*, because she does not treat the white majority as the center to begin with. By using humour extensively in her portrayal of characters, Smith successfully manages to dissolve the boundaries between center and periphery. Ultimately in *White Teeth*, Smith upholds the notion that history and colonial legacy will surely continue to shape the present and the future experiences of the postcolonial subject, but their axiomatic significations will be dismantled to transform London into a more tolerant multiethnic space.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.”
Mark Twain, “The Mysterious Stranger”

The quote from Mark Twain underscores the subversive function of laughter which destabilizes the power of the center. While it highlights the indeterminacy of laughter, it also suggests that laughing can be a more effective tool of destabilizing the established hierarchies. Although it is not directly linked to postcolonial immigrant fiction, its use of humour as a tool of subversion is remarkably similar to that of what I discussed throughout this study as *postcolonial humour*.

The novels of V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*, Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Admiring Silence* and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* can be marked as exemplary in their employment of humour as a tool of resistance in cross-cultural encounters. Despite the similarity of their subject matter, all the authors of these novels differ in the way they use humour, which I think highlights the different degrees of inclusion and exclusion they face in the First World. Still, in their distinct ways, they use laughter as a non-violent weapon to protect themselves from the discrimination they face in the metropolis and manage to make themselves heard by a wider audience. By resisting the closure of their suppressed histories in a humorous manner, all these novels attempt to disseminate the center-margin dynamics that haunt their lives as immigrants who are physically identifiable as “different/lesser individuals” in the First World. In doing this, they call into question what constitutes identity and denounce history as an

adequate base for this identification. In order to achieve this, all these works favour a non-linear narrative over a rigidly structured one and empty out all the meanings attributed to history. Moreover, they make use of the incongruities between the different accounts of the same story and thus disregard the official history that always views the colonial periphery as the subordinate in the postcolonial encounters in the metropolis. These incongruities are always self-consciously deployed to increase the level of irony, which demonstrates the struggle of the postcolonial subject to raise his/her voice without openly criticizing the metropolitan center, while at the same time criticizing it more fervently. Thus, the use of humour in postcolonial immigrant novels becomes an important tool in both resisting cultural hegemony and claiming their long lost agency.

Chapter 2 deals with V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and focuses on the life of the colonial minister Ralph Singh/ Ranjit Kripalsingh, who openly embraces the role of the peripheral mimic throughout the book. Internalizing the notion that the Third World countries are really backward and lack order, *The Mimic Men* employs a broken narrative with which the narrator ironically tries to give a sense of order to his life. This retrospective narrative aims to quilt the past and present in a way that makes all the pieces concordant, but the more Ralph writes the more he fails because he just cannot juxtapose the incongruities arising from his "real" past and the past that he has reshaped in his memory. This narrative irony foregrounds Naipaul's disbelief in the development of the underdeveloped Third World countries while at the same time criticizes the reasons they were left backward. Apart from the narrative irony, Naipaul employs a mimic that tries to emerge as authentic through the repetition of the actions of the colonizer. In doing this, Ralph Singh becomes the comic double of the serious colonizer, but in willingly affirming his subordination he is able to raise his voice. Singh, who cannot criticize the colonizer openly, makes use of subversive mimicry. This mimicry is different from the other mimics in that it is intentionally employed by V.S. Naipaul, who denounces the

postcolonial tendency to be counter-discursive, on grounds that communal opposition to colonialism reiterates its superiority. Ralph Singh's use of mimicry is largely due to his inability to detach himself completely from the colonial society that he detests and attach himself to the culture that does not accept him. Thus his use of bitter humour helps him narrate the adversities Singh weathers out in both his host and home cultures, neither of which he belongs to. When he achieves closure by discarding all the established notions of identity, the tacit necessity for irony and mimicry ceases because he does not need to resort to humour to make himself heard anymore.

Chapter 3 focuses on the story of the nameless narrator of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*. The novel narrates the life of a silenced narrator who has immigrated to the metropolis and suffers from severe cultural displacement. Having been stigmatized as the "Other" in London, he is not assimilated into the white majority, whose notions of cultural identity is shaped by essentialist elements such as common historical experiences, whiteness, ancestry and shared cultural codes. Failing to belong to the host culture, where he faces daily rejection from the subjects of the metropolis, the narrator resorts to silence and sarcasm as subversive tools of survival in the culture which refuses to let him belong. In order to survive, the narrator tells self-deprecating stories about his home culture to his audience in the novel to please their colonial curiosity and thereby affirms the subordinate position in the colonial binary. In these stories he makes use of the in and out-grouping function of humour and falls back on the dual framework of sarcasm that implies the opposite of what it seems to affirm. Although he never overtly criticizes the subjects of the metropolitan center, the nameless narrator employs silent sarcasm, which dramatizes the hypocrisy that underlies the colonial project. Apart from these stories, the narrator's silence throughout the novel allows him to have an impenetrable zone to himself, in which he never stops talking and mocking the colonizers. In doing this the narrator excludes all the characters in the novel from his private

zone and makes only the readers aware of his real feelings. Although both the nameless narrator and Naipaul's Ralph Singh share similar experiences of immigration, the nameless narrator does not resort to mimicking the attitudes of the colonizer like Singh does because he has understood that he can not belong even if he were more English than English. In this respect, both characters' approaches to identity remain to a large extent performative, but differ in that Singh performs to become really English while the nameless narrator performs to only please his metropolitan audience.

In Chapter 4, *White Teeth* slightly alters the link between humour and cultural identity by placing the argument of cultural identity on a new axis and uses humour as a tool to bridge gaps between different ethnic groups in a multicultural space. The novel, which traces three generations of three families in London attempts to deconstruct the conventional notions of identity and reconstruct them through hybrid representations which are shaped not by history but by the personal histories and present circumstances. Throughout the novel, Zadie Smith lets the characters stereotype their views of themselves as well as those they imitate and shows all the characters' endeavors to belong in an established foundation or group that they assume will grant them the authenticity they seek. However, in order not to take the issue of cultural purity too seriously, Smith intentionally includes a considerable dose of irony which reveals the incongruities of their stereotypes and portray her characters' search to be essentially futile but harmless. Smith destabilizes history as a pillar of cultural identity and champions everyday hybridity over a fixed group identity. To achieve this, she employs an omniscient narrator who intervenes to mock any character who takes their roots and fundamentals too seriously. Apart from the omniscient narrator, Smith juxtaposes the important issues with the trivial things like cultural identity and a Hoover bag to detach the importance attributed to these events. With the employment of the comic lens, Smith aptly destabilizes the binary opposition between the West and the rest and shows a lot of confidence

in the transformation of the former colonial capital as a new multiethnic space, tolerant to cultural diversity.

Smith's use of humour is different from Naipaul and Gurnah because she remains equidistant to her characters and is impartial in her light-hearted mockery. She introduces funny misfortunes to all her characters, which eliminate the hierarchical binary between the center and periphery. In this respect, Smith's humour does not "laugh back" at the colonizer but invites them to "laugh with" the colonized to disseminate the boundary between cultures and ethnicities. Smith does not totally disregard the differences between ethnicities and the impact of the past on the present but merely offers to develop a mutual understanding of the "Other" (which can be both the white and the non-white) who turns out to be similar with respect to their search for a group-identity.

By (ab)using the gap between the appearance – what is narrated – and the reality – what is disguised in humour – *The Mimic Men*, *Admiring Silence* and *White Teeth* share the common characteristic of employing humour in their narratives to oppose the essentialist notions of identity which excludes the displaced and marginalized immigrants. However, there are two possible problems in the immigrant postcolonial subjects' use of humour. Firstly, being a highly subjective matter, the use of humour and humorous resistance will fail if the intended meanings are not understood by the target audience of humour. Due to the indeterminacy of the reasons of laughter, the arrows of humour might turn against the one who starts it, i.e. the ex-colonized. Thus, the tool of laughter runs the risk of mocking the postcolonial immigrant subject instead of criticizing the metropolitan center. This risk is evident in *The Mimic Men* and *Admiring Silence*, in which the authors' use of humour is mainly subversive and attempts to mock their subordinate and marginal position in the colonial hierarchy to actually criticize the colonial project and colonizer's historical superiority. These novels contain the risk of being too obvious in their outright approval of

the established hierarchies. The second problematic aspect of “laughing back” is similar to the postcolonial current of “writing back”, which questions the power of the dominant regimes and scrutinizes the codes of colonial dominion by rereading and rewriting the official European history (*Empire*, Ashcroft et al. 196). As Ashcroft et al. also discuss expansively in *The Empire Writes Back*, writing the alternative and subversive histories does not gain the independence they seek and thus remain “counter-discursive rather than homologous practices” (196). A similar point can be made for the subversive and resistant laughter which always remains “referential” to the metropolitan center in its “oppositonality”. Humour can strengthen the existing stereotypes and show “the inevitability of existing social structures, thereby maintaining them” (Hart 7). Again, *The Mimic Men* and *Admiring Silence* provide us with the examples of the oppositionality that cannot escape from being referential to that which it opposes, because their use of humour does not attempt to bridge gaps between different cultures but underscore the incommensurability between them. *White Teeth* differs from the other two novels with respect to its use of humour: it focuses on the sameness of the subjects from different ethnicities and attempts to use humour to negotiate their identities. Hence it is not oppositional to the official European hegemony and offers a way out of the closed circuit of the colonial binary.

Despite the possible pitfalls of humour in the postcolonial context, *The Mimic Men* by V.S. Naipaul, *Admiring Silence* from Abdulrazak Gurnah and *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith laugh back at the colonizers. Humour in Naipaul and Gurnah is essentially referential and subversive but Smith’s employment of humour manages to break the official barriers established between the metropolitan center and the postcolonial periphery, and the peripheral subject in the metropolis. Championing everyday hybridity over cultural essentialism seems to be the only way to take a step outside the closed circle of postcolonialism. Smith has been criticized for being too optimistic in her harmonious portrayal of multiethnic characters, but I

think a certain degree of optimism and light-hearted humour proves helpful in dealing with the position of the ex-colonized immigrant in the metropolis, which is still a fragile state. I believe that it is Smith's use of humour that will help renegotiate the postcolonial identities rather than that of Naipaul and Gurnah. Although it does not offer closure in terms of the current postcolonial issues *per se*, it points toward a new direction in which the concepts of cultural identity are redefined and the discussion of cultural identity is placed on a different axis.

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