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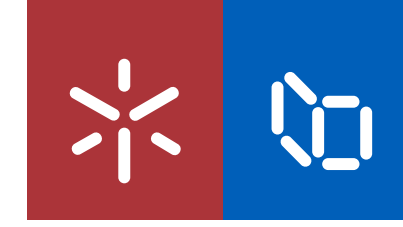
Literature and Society: Bauman's Liquid Modernity in Zadie Smith's Novels White Teeth and NW
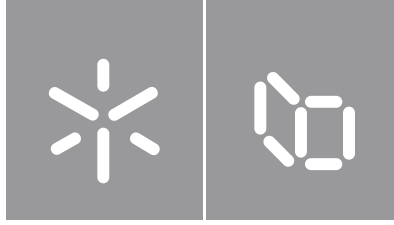
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Literature and Society: Bauman's Liquid Modernity in Zadie Smith's Novels White Teeth and NW

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Professor Margarida Isabel Esteves da Silva Pereira

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STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

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LITERATURA E SOCIEDADE: A MODERNIDADE LÍQUIDA DE BAUMAN NOS ROMANCES *DENTES BRANCOS* E *NW* DE ZADIE SMITH

RESUMO

A literatura contemporânea é, de muitas maneiras, transnacional e, como resultado dessa expansão geral da arte e da cultura, há uma ampla gama de diferentes aspetos a serem examinados nesta área. Entre eles, vamos retratar temas como identidade, urbanismo, classe social, migração, capitalismo e multiculturalismo sob a ótica da Modernidade Líquida, conceito desenvolvido pelo sociólogo e filósofo polonês Zygmunt Bauman. O mundo pós-moderno é caracterizado pela quebra de barreiras geográficas e, como resultado, vivemos em um fluxo constante de informações e influências culturais. Mas como essa conexão inesperada com o mundo está a nos afetar? Com isso em mente, vamos observar a representação dessas questões na obra literária da escritora britânica Zadie Smith, em particular em seus romances *Dentes Brancos* (2000) e *NW* (2012). Essas duas histórias mostram como é viver na Londres moderna, um lugar cosmopolita onde a globalização, o consumismo e a velocidade são todos componentes que se relacionam nesta nova realidade. Assim sendo, os padrões morais e sociais vêm passando por uma crise em que as pessoas buscam um senso de direção e sentem a necessidade de um modelo ou pelo menos de alguma orientação no limbo em que vivemos. Essa grande multiplicidade tem gerado perplexidade no comportamento humano e nas relações sociais que, paradoxalmente, aproximam e distanciam. Nesse sentido, iremos analisar os fragmentos de evidências e especificidades dos aspetos acima mencionados na literatura de Smith.

Palavras-chave: Literatura de Migração; Modernidade Líquida; Zadie Smith; Zygmunt Bauman.

LITERATURE AND SOCIETY: BAUMAN'S LIQUID MODERNITY IN ZADIE SMITH'S NOVELS *WHITE TEETH* AND *NW*

ABSTRACT

Contemporary literature is, in many ways, transnational and as a result of this general expansiveness in art and culture, there is a wide range of different aspects to be scrutinized in this area. Among them, we are going to depict themes such as identity, urbanism, social class, migration, capitalism, and multiculturalism from the standpoint of *Liquid Modernity*, a concept developed by the Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman. The postmodern world is characterized by the surpassing of geographical barriers and, as a result, we live in a steady stream of information and cultural influences. But how is this unexpected world connection affecting us? With this in mind, we are going to observe the representation of these matters in the literary work of the British writer Zadie Smith, particularly in her novels *White Teeth* (2000) and *NW* (2012). These two stories display what it is like to live in modern London, a cosmopolitan place where globalization, consumerism, and speed are all related components of this new reality. Accordingly, moral and social standards have been going through a crisis in which people search for a sense of direction and feel the need for a model or at least some guidance in the limbo in which we live. This great multiplicity has prompted bewilderment in human behavior and social relations, which, paradoxically, approximates and distances. In this sense, we will analyze the shreds of evidence and specificities of the abovementioned aspects in Smith's literature.

Keywords: Liquid Modernity; Migration Literature; Zadie Smith; Zygmunt Bauman.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, the world has been inevitably affiliated to cultural multiplicity as a result of globalization and modernization. Along with this plurality, new subject matters arise in all different fields of academic research. One of these new topics is the concept of *Liquid Modernity*, coined by the sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman. In this dissertation, we are going to address how this topic appears in the literary work of the writer Zadie Smith.

Not so long ago, human behavior was much less dynamic. Since the second stage of the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 19th century and, subsequently, the emergence of advanced technologies (computers, internet, smartphones, etc.), communications have been developing faster, resulting in the search for instantaneousness and superficiality in a society that is in constant motion. In this sense, Bauman (2000) states that

> it would be imprudent to deny, or even to play down, the profound change which the advent of 'fluid modernity' has brought to the human condition. The remoteness and unreachability of systemic structure, coupled with the unstructured, fluid state of the immediate setting of life-politics, radically change that condition and call for a rethinking of old concepts that used to frame its narratives. Like zombies, such concepts are today simultaneously dead and alive. The practical question is whether their resurrection, albeit in a new shape or incarnation, is feasible; or – if it is not – how to arrange for their decent and effective burial. (p. 8)

Thus, in such an overly dynamic existence, values, morals, or even *the truth* enter a state of uncertainty in which form is lost. As a result, people start to miss the former *simplicity* and cry out for some social model to be followed, in search of a (re) construction of identity. Because of these constant and unexpected behavioral reformulations, we find ourselves in a limbo of *zombie* concepts. It is a kind of transition or adaptation to this innovative reality that has never been experienced before.

This feeling of disorientation with the new social reality in which we find ourselves is evidenced in various ways in literature, especially in contemporary literature. With that said, our specific goals are to show how these modern concerns (social disorientation, identity crisis, modern pluralism, and so on) are presented in Smith's novels *White Teeth* (2000) and *NW* (2012).

Paralleling these behaviors with what is represented today in postmodern literature, this state of uncertainty is evident in the incessant and often ineffective search for some sort of *new new*.

Apparently, our contemporary literature is no longer able to show anything that could be considered unprecedented. In this sense, Ihab Hassan (1987, p. 3) points out that "the idea of an avant-garde in literature seems unduly naïve today. Inured to crisis, we have also lost the confident sense of direction." Despite this outwardly pessimistic idea, the bright side is that, as a result of this cultural globalization, there is also greater transparency, a breakdown of barriers, and a higher tendency towards a variety of styles.

In this sense, as Elleke Boehmer (1995, p. 232) highlights, literature has changed "from national bonding to international wanderings, from rootedness to peregrination." In addition, art without a predetermined style or model contributes to more multiple and diversified creations. In postmodern writings, we witness a strong element of diversity in form, style, and genres, and thus, the matters of individuality are also disintegrated. (Paterson, 2015, p.180)[1]

A practical way to analyze this heterogeneous and globalized concept is through the *Literature of Immigration*, one of the categories to which Smith is commonly related. Undoubtedly, in the postmodern era, cultures fuse in such a way that disadvantaged nations, previously invisible, now start to have greater relevance in identity constructions and so literature starts to be formulated with a less national and more global perspective. The social standards of a nation-state are no longer unique and "whereas early post-independence writers tended to identify with nationalist causes and to endorse the need for communal solidarity, in the 1980s and early 1990s many writers' geographic and cultural affiliations have become more divided and uncertain." (Boehmer, 1995, p. 232).

This multiplicity is not necessarily positive or negative. It is simply an inevitable fact and it exists as a result of a series of historical events that directly interfered with new cultural patterns (or *non-patterns*). Therefore, "cultural expatriation is now widely regarded as intrinsic to the end-of-century postcolonial literary experience, impinging on writing and the making of literature world-wide." (*Ibidem*). And even after the end of the century until today, there is a tendency to surpass the national paradigms. This new and postcolonial *(de)standardization* is widely addressed in Smith's novels, which deal with diversified and global themes namely the uprooting of the immigrant, multiculturalism, as well as matters of religion, race, and social class.

From these analyses, besides presenting other writers who relate to her work, we are going to highlight reflections related to how the abovementioned elements can be observed in modern England,

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[1] Our source was a translation from English to Portuguese of the essay *The subject in motion: postmodern, migrant and transnational*, translated by Patrícia C.R. Reuillard (UFRGS): "Pode-se constar que o heterogêneo é o ponto focal da escritura pós-moderna, que opera a mistura das formas, a impureza dos estilos, a contaminação dos gêneros e a fragmentação dos sujeitos."

especially in London. After all, even artistically and imaginatively, literary works represent a spectrum of human behavior and are indisputably connected to the way we live.

All arts are in parallel with social phenomena and, consequently, they are also in parallel with social sciences, namely sociology and philosophy. Knowledge is undoubtedly developed in interdisciplinary manners, as it is impossible not to connect different fields of study. Therefore, with a central focus on literature, this paper is also going to cross these areas. It mostly crosses the sociology and philosophy presented in Bauman's work, but secondarily, some other scholars are also used in our study. Among others, some of them are Raymond Williams (1973; 1990), Stuart Hall (1996), Ihab Hassan (1987), Anthony Giddens (2002), Terry Eagleton (1996; 2001), Roland Barthes (1977), and Matei Calinescu (1997).

Williams, for instance, has worked in many ways to connect literature (and arts in general) with social studies, history, and politics. Foucault is cited in Bauman's (2000) work when he underlines his studies about Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. Hassan is interested in understanding the nuances of postmodernism. Giddens has a study about Globalization and how it affects modern life. Eagleton addresses matters of nationalism and social class. Barthes has brought great innovations with regards to intertextuality and literary criticism, which served as a base for more contributions made by Calinescu and others. All these themes are interconnected and present a striking contribution to literary studies.

This diversity of modern life is denounced by Smith herself, as when she answered questions from her fans to an article from *The Guardian*. She has pointed out: "I have a very messy and chaotic mind." (Smith, 2018). In the most positive connotation of the word *chaotic*, we as readers, already acquainted with her writing approach, could never expect anything different from this sort of statement; we do live in a turbulent world.

Her book of essays *Feel Free* (2018), for instance, is a clear evidence of the excess of information that we are constantly receiving from so many distinct sources of media and entertainment in general. Quoting sentences from Smith's book, Kathryn Bromwich (2018, n.p.) highlights that "she writes with equal fervour about Jay-Z's rapping, which 'pours right into your ear like water from a tap', as about Edward St Aubyn's 'rich, acerbic comedy'". Therefore, it is from *this* chaotic perspective that we draw our inspiration.

To present this reality, this dissertation is divided into three parts: Literature and Liquid Modernity; The Writing of Zadie Smith; and Liquid Modernity in *White Teeth* and *NW*. The first part builds the connection between literary studies and the social perception of *Liquid Modernity*, as

opposed to the former *Solid Modernity*. It presents the many ways in which literature and society walk together. In this sense, it addresses how Globalization and Migration cross the arts and social sciences, finalizing with observations about cosmopolitan London; the city where both stories take place.

The second section focuses on a variety of themes addressed in Smith's literary work, showing not only the two main novels but also her complete bibliography, including other narratives and essays. In this part, we explain how all her work is somehow concerned with the social and psychological challenges of modern and liquid life. Besides presenting her books, it displays her influences as a writer from names such as David Forster Wallace, Zora Neale Hurston, and Edward Morgan Forster as well as other contemporary novelists that reflect similar matters, such as Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Kazuo Ishiguro, and others.

The final part relates to the former chapters, that is to say, it confirms that Bauman's social concepts are visibly portrayed in Smith's narratives. In this sense, it displays the specificities of the characters from *White Teeth* and *NW*, also highlighting the differences of focus and raised topics in the stories. Moreover, it explains how these stories show the main elements of a society living in a liquid world, presenting how people live today in a reality of constant dynamism. To clarify this idea, we give attention to some of the modern matters such as the notions of community; work and capitalism; individuality and identification; social class; prejudice in a spectrum of diversity; the feeling of bewilderment and lack of patterns; the search for freedom; and modern territorialism and nationalism.

PART ONE: LITERATURE AND LIQUID MODERNITY

1. Literature, Society, and Globalization

To speak about literature and society is a way to relate literature with social studies; and it is well known that literature and sociology are two different areas. Sociology is a science whereas literature is a form of art. However, as we see in the multidisciplinary book created from discussions through conversation-in-letters called *In Praise of Literature* (2016), Zygmunt Bauman and Riccardo Mazzeo underline that the relationship between the two takes place through *culture*.

Culture has to do with human behavior, education, politics, and so on. The scope is wide and as wider as this scope could be, these are all themes portrayed in literature since this discipline displays, among other things, the connection between human and social life. Ergo, there are several possibilities to be depicted in order to link these areas. In this sense, they uphold that

> literature and sociology share the field they explore, their subject-matter and topics – as well as (at least to a substantive degree) their vocation and social impact. As one of us said, in trying to spell out the nature of their kinship and cooperation, literature and sociology are 'complementary, supplementary to each other and reciprocally enriching. They are by no means in competition [...] – let alone at loggerheads or cross-purposes. Knowingly or not, deliberately or matter-of-factly, *they pursue the same purpose*; one could say "they belong to the same business". (Bauman & Mazzeo, 2016, p. 10) [our italics]

Accordingly, it is undeniable that stories are created by writers based on their social experiences. Regardless of whether it is fictional or not, whether it is prose or poetry, all in all, tales are always social and political. Thus, to disunify what is essentially unified is an overt mistake. It would be probably feasible to debate on how and to what degree this relationship occurs, but not to refute it completely.

With that said, "whatever we all and any of us see, think of seeing, or believe we are seeing, and whatever we do as a consequence, is woven in discourse." (Bauman, 2016, p. 21). Everything we know is a result of what is put into language, and these ideas put into language were all influenced by other ideas which were also put into languages and discourses from other people in an infinite cycle – from the past and towards the future.

In the afterthought of his book *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman (2000) brings a quite interesting reflection to what we are addressing, which is about the relationship between *the poets* (that is to say, the writers) and *the sociologists*. He states:

> if we do not wish to share the fate of 'false poets' and resent being 'false sociologists', we ought to come as close as the true poets do to *the yet hidden human possibilities*; and for that reason we need to pierce the walls of the obvious and self-evident, of that prevailing ideological fashion of the day whose commonality is taken for the proof of its sense. Demolishing such walls is as much the sociologist's as the poet's calling, and for the same reason: the walling-up of possibilities belies human potential while obstructing the disclosure of its bluff. (p. 203, our italics).

These *yet hidden possibilities* are infinite. They are evident in both areas and what we aim to do here is to contribute to avoid that the emergence of new horizons stops. In other words, we are allowing the growth of knowledge. The search for new discoveries needs to be in constant development. This is what literature and sociology have in common: they help humanity to go beyond the obvious, surpassing the common barriers of what is already known.

Taking into consideration that our focus is British Contemporary Literature, another word that needs to be addressed and which links culture, sociology, and literature is *Globalization*. We now live in a world that is a great and complex unit. Everything looks somehow entangled; what happens in a country may interfere in a different country on the other side of the globe. People are constantly interacting with one another from different places and cultures through television, the internet, and other modern technologies. As a result, we witness a shift from a cultural to a *multicultural* spectrum.

Because we live in a world that goes through a steady stream of changes, our values also change; they may eventually become mistier and thus, tradition gradually loses its significance. In this sense, Anthony Giddens (2002, p. 25) states: "The traditional family is under threat, is changing, and will change much further. Other traditions, such as those connected with religion, are also experiencing major transformations. Fundamentalism originates from a world of crumbling traditions."

Presumably, other than changes in religion, the gradual loss of patterns prompts a great feeling of *insecurity* towards several spheres of life. The idea of living, as Bauman would say, "like zombies" is present in many contemporary novels, which will be addressed later on. And so, a new battle arises: cosmopolitans *versus* fundamentalists (*Ibidem*). In a new social scenario of multiplicity, "cosmopolitans

welcome and embrace this cultural complexity. Fundamentalists find it disturbing and dangerous." (Giddens, 2002, p. 26). At least, "we can legitimately hope that a cosmopolitan outlook will win out" (*Ibidem*), even though this might take an indefinite time.

All these different social concepts have developed amazingly fast, just as the use of the word *globalization.* What we observe today is that "no political speech is complete without reference to it. Yet even in the late 1980s the term was hardly used, either in the academic literature or in everyday language. It has come from nowhere to be almost everywhere." *(Ibidem).*

However, if we look back at what led to this outcome, probably the most important historical event was The Industrial Revolution, an event that had a great influence not only in the world economies (from agriculture to large-scale industry) but in politics and culture. In this sense, to explain why he took British writers as a starting point to discuss some of the chief elements of culture and society, Raymond Williams (1990, p. 6) asserts:

> The Industrial Revolution, which eventually swept or impinged on most of the world, began in England. The fundamentally new social and cultural relationships and issues which were part of that historically decisive transition were therefore first felt, in their intense and unprecedented immediacy, within this culture. (1990, p. 6)

Nevertheless, we now live in a reality in which the features that define the culture (components that used to be very well defined such as religion, politics, moral values, language, traditions, etc.) of a nation-state are little by little weakened. Nationalism does not represent the same ideal that it once did. For many years, the nation-state "owed its success to the suppression of self-asserting communities; it fought tooth and nail against 'parochialism', local customs or 'dialects', promoting a unified language and historical memory at the expense of communal traditions." (Bauman, 2000, p. 173). So, paradoxically, to build a standardized culture, the nation-state used to suppress smaller cultural rituals.

Now in a globalized world, what once used to represent the identity of a country is entangled with the experiences of other countries. As a result, we see in the literature from the late twentieth century until now, a whole new range of reflections based on migration and multiculturalism. Along with this new approach, a crisis of individual identity also appears, which is not only caused by globalization but also by other factors that relate to Bauman's *Liquid Modernity*.

Moreover, it is crucial to stress that although it might be seen as a recent phenomenon, globalization is historically related to other not-so-current events. According to Paul Jay (2010, p. 2),

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as some scholars define globalization as a contemporary phenomenon linked to the development of electronic media, the rise of transnational corporations, global financial institutions, and proliferating forms of entertainment that easily leap national boundaries, others define it as a historical phenomenon running back to at least the sixteenth century and incorporating the histories of colonization, decolonization, and post-colonialism. (Jay, 2010, p.2)

As a result, if we take into consideration that globalization has begun a long time ago, there is a wider scope of literary studies in transnational matters that could probably include novels from the sixteenth century until today. An adequate analysis of the crisis regarding the notions of nationalism and the cultural aftermath of colonization is in the collection of essays first published in 1988 entitled *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature,* a study that addresses, among other things, the literature of the nineteenth century in Ireland, as opposed to the British. In the introduction, Seamus Deane (2001, p. 3) points out that although without great success,

Ireland produced, in the first three decades of this century, a remarkable literature in which the attempt to overcome and replace the colonial experience by something other, something that would be 'native' and yet not provincial, was a dynamic and central energy. (Deane, 2001, p. 3)

Therefore, Ireland "has once more raised the question of how the individual subject can be envisaged in relation to its community, its past history, and a possible future." (*Ibidem*). Indeed, identity is a wide concept that involves several social aspects, but today the influence of the *nation-culture* in the development of one's identity does not seem to have as much relevance as it used to, or at least as it appeared to. It is now the opposite that operates; that is to say, the more multiple we are the better are the chances for us to fit in with the rest, even though this may compromise our understanding of our *self*.

According to Deane (2001, p. 4), a proper example of the failure in trying to develop a new concept of nationalism in Irish literature is seen in the great work of James Joyce. In this sense, he puts forth: "this is true even when we consider Joyce's writings where the totalizing process finally homogenizes difference, erases rather than lives through oppositions like those of the cosmopolitan versus the national community."

Differently from what had generally happened in Europe in the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, that is to say, "the reconciliation of the specific and the universal" (*ibidem*), Ireland was at odds with what is called the Arnoldian notion of literature. Based on Matthew Arnold, this model upholds that "the 'best' literature is the literature that has managed to transcend the local, historical circumstances of its production and come to embody universal truths about reality and what it means to be human." (Jay, 2010, p. 17). On the other hand, it would be radical to categorically state that all literature that praises a national identity is somehow diminished, but the fact is that there was a duality between these in England and Ireland.

One of the results of this duality is that "the collusion of Irish with British nationalism has produced contrasting stereotypes whose most destructive effect has been the laying of the cultural basis for religious sectarianism (...) in relation to either Protestantism or Catholicism." (Deane, 2001, p. 8). This is just to exemplify how the idea of *nation-culture* may be complicated even to the point of causing a sense of rivalry. Religion is only one possibility to display a disparity of values and opinions.

With regard to other matters on the cultural sovereignty of the nation-state, Terry Eagleton, in the essay *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment*, puts forth a discussion on the irony of the alienation caused by the vindication of national values. We could, therefore, add that the very concept of nationalism is, to a certain degree, contrary to that of globalization as it goes towards an opposite direction from multiculturalism and fluid modernity. In this sense, he develops a correlation with class: "Nationalism, like class, would thus seem to involve an impossible irony. It is sometimes forgotten that social class, for Karl Marx at least, is itself a form of alienation, canceling the particularity of an individual life into collective anonymity." (Eagleton, 2001, p. 23)

However, just like the individual identity is threatened by nationalism it may also be threatened by globalization, which is another form of collective anonymity, like a great and complex unit of a nation-state. So that would be another irony. Apparently, building a set of rules with the aim of establishing a social order attracts the opposite of that social order and prompts great dissatisfaction. In this sense, Eagleton (2001, p. 26) states:

> Our grudge against the ruling order is not only that it has oppressed us in our social, sexual, or racial identities, but that it has thereby forced us to lavish an extraordinary amount of attention on these things, which are not in the long run all that important." (Eagleton, 2001, p. 26)

Thus, if we think about the meaning of being British or Irish or from any other country, we intrinsically envisage a whole set of characteristics that were historically related to that place. But that was for the exact reason of not having ways to go from one place to another, or at least to the fact that it used to be difficult to move through different nations and, consequently, to different cultures. Nevertheless, what we witness today is that it is not only easy to travel abroad as it is also easy to be somewhere else even without being physically there but virtually. Social, sexual or racial identities are, therefore, "not in the long run all that important" (*Ibidem*) because all social patterns are now fused, resulting in a paradoxical feeling of belonging and bewilderment.

In addition, Paul Jay claims that the transnational turn in literary studies is not caused only as a result of globalization. According to him, it "has to be understood as the effect of a more complicated set of intersecting forces dating back to the late 1960's, forces operating both within and outside the academy" (Jay, 2010, p. 17) including several social and political movements like

> the anti-Vietnam War movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the gay rights movement, and the rise of theoretical and critical practices within the academy dominated by a sustained and critical attention to *difference* (deconstruction; feminist and gender studies; work on race, class, and sexual orientation; and minority, multicultural, and postcolonial literatures). (Jay, 2010, p. 17, our italics)

All this variety of such important themes has developed a quite positive effect when it comes to *the search for freedom*. Many of these matters are intrinsically related to a search for new values, deconstructing old concepts and prejudices. As he stated, it all comes down to *difference*, and to understanding how our world differences operate and what the social prospects from this new reality are, we must reflect on our modernity today – the liquid modernity.

2. Literature of Migration in a Liquid World

In the year 2000, Zygmunt Bauman started this new concept with the book *Liquid Modernity* and then, as a result, he wrote many other books that establish a multidisciplinary study. For him, we live today in a society in which there is a steady movement, a movement which we have never experienced before and, therefore, we do not know how to deal with it. The most important key to tackle this situation is consciousness: being aware of the *liquefaction* of what used to be our social standards.

Right at the beginning of his book, he explains the metaphor with the term *liquid*. It has to do with instability, change, lack of *form*. And so, to present us this concept, he builds a comparison with the opposite term, *solid*. The *Solid Modernity* used to have patterns of life and values that were very well established. People knew what they wanted and planned their lives in a noticeably clear way, whereas today we encounter ourselves with a great amount of information that is affecting our power of choice and judgment.

What path we should follow, what opinion we should have, what beliefs we should trust in, or what job we should look for are some of our agonies, because our world has infinite options and innovations, resulting in great uncertainty. Therefore, there is a tendency for people not to plan their life job or life partner, as now life is so fickle. We only plan our current job, current partner (Bauman reflects more deeply on this issue in the book *Liquid Love* - 2003), current diet or more drastically, our current opinions, our current political views, and so on. Sometimes it is hard even to understand whether certain actions are morally right or wrong.

To contextualize and develop his ideas, Bauman presents the differences between these two different historical and sociological periods, solid and liquid. One aspect that differs quite notably is the notion of time and space and how this interferes in the games of power through the territory. In this sense, he reflects on how the philosopher Michel Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon[2] to portray this matter. In the Panopticon,

> the inmates were tied to the place and barred from all movement, confined within thick, dense and closely guarded walls and fixed to their beds, cells or work-benches. They could not move because they were under watch; they had to stick to their appointed places at all times because they did not know, and had no way of knowing, where at the moment their watchers - free to move at will - were." (Bauman, 2000, pp. 9-10)

Under these circumstances, there is a hierarchy of power in which we have the ones who watch and the ones who are watched. This hypothesis used to make sense when territory was extremely important and directly associated with the notion of power. However, in our modern liquid world, this is no longer necessary. We are now experiencing a new reality in which "power can move with the speed

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[2] The Panopticon was designed by the English philosopher, jurist, and social reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). It was a proposal of a penitentiary "envisaged as a circular building, with the prisoners' cells arranged around the outer wall and the central point dominated by an inspection tower." (Retrieved in https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bentham-project/who-was-jeremy-bentham/panopticon). There was never a prison built by the exact model created by Bentham, although there are many prison buildings until our current days which resemble some of its characteristics.

of the electronic signal - and so the time required for the movement of its essential ingredients has been reduced to instantaneity." (Bauman, 2000, p. 10-11)

In times of Solid Modernity, the best way to wield power over others was to have total control on the space where they were, and therefore time was managed by the "routinizers." However, we now live in a *Post-panoptical* reality in which the best techniques of power are "escape, slippage, elision and avoidance, the effective rejection of any territorial confinement." (Bauman, 2000, p. 11). Having said that, with the new global and *exterritorial* scenario, as we have stressed, the very ideal of nationalism becomes vague.

On the other hand, we no longer must worry about "routinizers" watching us to know what we are doing, because being watched the whole time has become the new normal to the point that we want other people to know what we are doing, how we live and our most confidential information, as we see in social media, for example. As a result of this new reality, the private surpasses the public and thus it becomes public as well.

Another way to perceive how the relation time/space has changed is to reflect on the concept of city. A city is meant to be filled with strangers and being in the position of stranger is precisely what makes us be civilized and behave according to certain rules. In this sense, Bauman (2000) states:

The meeting of strangers is an event without a past. More often than not, it is also an event without a future (it is expected to be, hoped to be, free of a future), a story most certainly 'not to be continued', a one-off chance, to be consummated in full while it lasts and on the spot, without delay and without putting the unfinished business off to another occasion." (p. 95)

At odds with this traditional concept of civilization in which we do not know all the citizens, a special city was once designed by the architect George Hazeldon. He aimed to create a city "unlike ordinary cities, full of ominous-looking strangers oozing from dark corners" (*Ibidem*, p. 91). However, a city that is surrounded and protected from others eradicates the civility of the people living there. Civility is fundamentally public and a city like that is private. Once again, the private surpasses the public.

As Bauman upholds, the fear of being observed by the State shown in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949) is no longer the only possibility. Instead of being afraid of how the government would surveil our behavior, we ourselves are constantly playing this role. With the advance of technology in liquid times, it is no longer necessary to lock people up in order to

have control over them, since "holding to the ground is not that important if the ground can be reached and abandoned at whim." (Bauman, 2000, p. 13).

As a result, what we many times observe in contemporary literature are novels depicting characters with a lack of roots in place and in values. Our world is a whole big, globalized unit and this can be observed in the literature of migration and postcolonialism. According to Franssen & Kuipers (2015, p. 292), if we are all part of the same territory, a connected and fluid world, it is understood that "literature has given way to other, mainly visual and digital, cultural forms." One of the results is that "the question of translation flows from the (semi-)periphery to the core." Before this change, most of the literary renowned works were books translated from English and that belonged to "the literary centres of Paris and New York." *(Ibidem)*, but now national identities have been transforming their concepts.

This world phenomenon has started approximately by the end of the twentieth century and therefore, progressively and positively, countries have become less segregated and more alike. According to Boehmer (1995, p. 243), "the multivoiced migrant novel gave vivid expression to theories of the 'open', indeterminate text, or of transgressive, non-authoritative reading." As a result, we witness an interest in "the provisional and fragmentary aspects of signification" (*Ibidem*) as well as in "the constructed nature of identity". (*Ibidem*).

Inevitably, literature has turned into a new direction that has to do with diversity and multiculturalism, and this is an outcome of the sociological changes we have been discussing in this study. Thus, the same way as we see that Liquid Modernity brings a certain feeling of confusion, many of the world's latest novels also bring about this positive idea of openness and acceptability. As Boehmer (1995, p. 244) also stresses, "postcolonial and postmodern critical approaches cross in their concern with marginality, ambiguity, disintegrating binaries, and all things parodied, piebald, dual, mimicked, always-already borrowed, and ironically secondhand."

Within this great diversity, however, there are (and there will still be for an indefinite time) adversities as to dealing with cultural differences, and these differences must be understood and experienced with a free mind toward the new panorama in which we live. In this sense, Boehmer (1995, p. 245) points out that

despite the common experience of empire, cultures in relationship will in some measure always experience difficulty in completely understanding one another. If carelessly expressed, a perception such as this can risk resurrecting the old idea that East must remain East, and West

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West. My claim, I must therefore clarify, is not that a society is necessarily enclosed within the scaffolding of its own values and preconceptions. Rather what interests is the partial opacity to one another of different conceptual worlds and the importance of trying to clear up that opacity to some degree with diligent research and applied understanding.

Our current frenetic environment is, therefore, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there is an increase of possibilities and the breaking of old concepts and cultural or geographical barriers (such as prejudice, for instance), which has to do with *multiculturalism* and people living in better harmony. On the other hand, there might also be a lack of guidance to social patterns or, more drastically, a tendency to intolerance, which according to Walkowitz (2009), is more often linked to *minority cultures* in literature. Humans have never felt so lost with such an abundance of information. Thus, freedom (or the eternal search for it) may be a positive outcome of the modern world, but it is difficult to gauge if there is a healthy limit to it. With this regard, Bauman (2000) states:

'Being thrown on one's own resources' augurs mental torments and the agony of indecision, while 'responsibility resting on one's own shoulders' portends a paralysing fear of risk and failure without the right to appeal and seek redress. This cannot be what 'freedom' really means; and if 'really existing' freedom, the freedom on offer, does mean all that, it can be neither the warrant of happiness nor an objective worth fighting for. (p. 19)

"Mental torments" and "agony of indecision" are quite present in the characters of contemporary literature because of the excess of possibilities, information, and world connections, so we must ask ourselves if there is really such a thing as total freedom or whether having too much freedom is also a type of prison. Increasingly, we witness stories that display *insecurity*, not that this component was not there in any other historical period in literature, but as we evolve and change, problems change their perspective and now we see a different kind of *insecurity* as an outcome of a *liquid culture.*

As Williams (1990, p. 289) points out, this utopian and potentially dangerous *freedom* is somehow what Orwell was seeking, for he was "one of a significant number of men who, deprived of a settled way of living, or of a faith, or having rejected those which were inherited, find virtue in a kind of improvised living, and in an assertion of independence." However, "there is no other way to pursue the liberation but to 'submit to society' and to follow its norms" (Bauman, 2000, p. 20), but what norms?

When we *submit* to society, all forms of human manifestations subconsciously fit into the new established values. It is not different in literature, as Williams (1990) states:

> an essential hypothesis in the development of the idea of culture is that the art of a period is closely and necessarily related to the generally prevalent 'way of life', and further that, in consequence, aesthetic, moral and social judgements are closely interrelated. (p. 130)

The big issue today is to understand whether we have a *prevalent 'way of life'* or if we are living in an adjustable limbo. For instance, if we think about how religion interferes in our culture, we could also think that it is not only the *beliefs* – in the sense of faith in a greater divine God – that are relevant but a wider sense of what it means to be part of a religion. Regarding what we understand as Western Christian values, Williams shows how T. S. Eliot's essay *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1940) depicts the way these standards mold us to live according to what seems like a judicious behavior. Williams (1990, p. 232) states that the essay's chief matter is "to distinguish a Christian idea of society from other ideas with which it has become entangled, or by which it is evidently denied." (p. 230). However, what often happens today is that socially established patterns are turned into *the lack of patterns* and a feeling of uncertainty.

To show this uncertainty in a practical example, we underline Paul Auster's novel *Invisible* (2009). The main character Adam Walker usually does not seem to be under the control of his life as in the case of the friendship he develops with Prof. Rudolf Born. Although he has second thoughts about whether he could or could not rely on Born, he continues to build a relationship with him. He also builds a relationship with Prof. Born's partner Margot, as he cannot avoid his feelings for her. Moreover, he builds an incestuous affair with his sister Gwyn. He knows this is considered immoral but does it anyway.

He does not succeed in making sure that he is *living the right way*. There is this idea that the world commands us (not the other way around), leads our paths, and that things happen by chance. To a certain extent, the author is saying that people have different views on things, interpretations of life are variable, and we cannot be completely certain about all facts. In other words, truth is relative.

In this sense, Bauman (2000) presents two social types of individual: "there is a wide and growing gap between the condition of individuals *de jure* and their chances to become individuals *de facto* - that is, to gain control over their fate and make the choices they truly desire." (p.39) These observations have to do with freedom. By feeling that he is not under the control of his life, Adam

Walker may be seen as a representation of an individual *de jure,* a man who does not feel free, like he is not doing what he wants; he is just going with the flow. On the other hand, it is difficult or even perhaps utopian to think that we can live in a world where we always do exactly what we want. There are rules and these rules are necessary to live in society. It is therefore a paradox: being totally free is being imprisoned in uncertainty.

Nevertheless, although a modern and globalized world brings disorientation, it also brings more opportunities and more chances to understand reality from a broader perspective. Migration is studied in a great variety of ranges such as geography, sociology, anthropology, history, statistics, law, economy, but in literature there are probably the most intrinsic observations concerning the subjectivities of *the individual*. With that said, King (2003) states:

> Literary accounts focus in a very direct and penetrating way on issues such as place perception, landscape symbolism, senses of displacement and transformation, communities lost and created anew, exploitation, nostalgia, attitudes towards return, family relationships, self-denial and self-discovery, and many more. Such insights are often infinitely more subtle and meaningful than studies of migrants which base themselves on cold statistics or on the depersonalised, aggregate responses to questionnaire surveys. (p. 10)

Thus, it is in literature that we can scrutinize human and psychological elements that go beyond isolated data, historical events, and common facts. However, let us emphasize that we are by no means discrediting other areas. On the contrary, it is precisely because of the differences in how to analyze a subject matter that we can enrich the academic fields, even because these fields also overlap. Therefore, this is just to explain how literary studies present a distinct perspective.

In this sense of a global and liquid world, what we often notice in the literature of migration does not only depict characters experiencing cultural differences, issues with prejudice, nor the willingness to go back to their homeland. It is not only a feeling of rootlessness from their own place but a general sentiment about what it is "to feel a stranger and yet at home, to live simultaneously inside and outside one's immediate situation, to be permanently on the run, to think of returning but to realise at the same time the impossibility of doing so". *(Ibidem)*

Since when we have developed modern ways to go from one place to another, be it by car, planes or virtually through the internet (without even having to be physically somewhere else), our level of connection interfered with everything we do, but if we think about the modern migratory process in

culture and arts in general, it can be divided into three historical periods, so we can visualize it more clearly.

As Bauman stresses in his work *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (2011), the first phase "was the emigration of about 60 million people from Europe, the only 'modernizing area of the planet at the time (that is to say, the only 'overpopulated' terrain), to 'empty lands'" (p. 34). In other words, it is the period of colonization, and the *empty lands* are properly between quotation marks for the obvious reason that these other lands were already populated by the indigenous peoples. In the second period, what happened was that "some of the native populations – with varying degrees of education and 'cultural sophistication' – followed the colonialists returning to their homelands" and this "has not yet come to an end" (*Ibidem*). At last, it comes the third, which may be called as

> the *age of diasporas*: an infinite archipelago of ethnic, religious and linguistic settlements, heedless of the pathways marked out and paved by the imperial/colonial episode, and steered instead by the logic of the *global redistribution* of living resources and the chances of survival peculiar to the current stadium of globalization. (Bauman, 2011, p. 35) [our italics]

Thus, it is this last period that mostly relates with the central focus of this work, as it is a period marked by diversity and multiculturalism, and so more often perceived in contemporary literature such as in the work of Zadie Smith (which we will be focusing on in the next chapters). Therefore, in this most recent period of migration, we live in a reality in which "almost no country today is exclusively a place of immigration or emigration." (*ibidem*) There is a steady stream of people coming in and out, to and from different nations, hence the abovementioned nebulosity in the concept of nationalism, as this period brings about "a question mark over the incipient and unbreakable bond between identity and nationality." (*Ibidem*).

In this sense, there are many aspects of the individual identity that build human character and that are constantly changing. According to Paul White (2003, p. 1) in the introduction of the edited book *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, these "transformations also occur in the lives of all those involved; not just the migrants themselves but also those who directly come into contact with them and those who, indirectly, are affected by social, political and economic changes induced by migration." Thus, as we see in the work of authors such as Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Kazuo Ishiguro, Monica Ali, and others, the transformation happens widely, that is to say, not only in the main and migrant characters but also in the secondary characters, who may not be migrants at all.

Moreover, it is important to stress that although these novels depict the reality of migrants, they are not only about this topic in particular. All in all, they are novels, like any other, which depict many subject matters such as love, life purpose, identity, depression, relationships, gender issues, family, religion, traditions, prejudice, social inequality, and so forth. These elements are all somehow related and, of course, it would be impossible for writers to write a novel that illustrates only one isolated theme.

With regard to the configuration of one's identity, for instance, we notice that in the literature of migration, there are always different possibilities and different ways of interpreting certain situations. As a result, we frequently witness a strong component of *ambivalence*, as White (2003) highlights:

> Ambivalence towards the past and the present: as to whether things were better 'then' or 'now'. Ambivalence towards the future: whether to retain a 'myth of return' or to design a new project without further expected movement built in. Ambivalence towards the 'host' society: feelings of respect, dislike or uncertainty. Ambivalence towards standards of behaviour: whether to cling to the old or to discard it, whether to compromise via symbolic events whilst adhering to the new on an everyday basis. (p. 4)

It is always impossible to know whether "things were better 'then or 'now'" and so we again perceive an atmosphere of uncertainty, depicted in Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (2000) as a consequence of the modern lack of patterns and that is as erratic as the 'myth of return'. No one could ever know what the "right choice" would be and thus, the *"host" society*, without knowing how to deal with the migrants, may like or dislike them.

The migrant characters do not know how to behave (otherwise stated, whether they should follow the old family traditions or open themselves to what is new and unknown) and the "host" society might cope with this new reality with a negative or a positive look towards them. This duality is a portrait of how the combination of behavioral standards occurs in society and therefore, novels such as these have a direct relation with modern sociology and globalization.

3. Multicultural London

The most important places where the literature of migration is depicted are presumably the ones with more diversity and, as we have seen, these places are often the big cities, where there is a lot

of life opportunities due to their economic growth. In this sense, London is the big city where both of Smith's novels here scrutinized take place. Thus, it is important to contextualize the historical background of this city so we can understand why and how this place came to be of such great interest.

Much before the time when people were coming to England from other countries, London was already targeted by the English themselves from other cities. Between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, the modernization derived from the Industrial Revolution along with the development of transportation methods led many English to look for new horizons in the already big city, compared to the others. With that said, Kevin Schürer and Joseph Day (2019) assert:

In the era of the stagecoach (1750–1830) travel times to London improved fourfold, yet with the coming of the railway they shrank dramatically. On average the journey from London to Manchester took between 25 to 30 hours by coach; by the mid-nineteenth century, steam trains reduced this to just 6–8 hours. (p. 29)

As Bauman (2000) once put it, the idea of *territory* was gradually moving towards a new designation in which there would be no more complications to move in long distances to places so far unknown, and thus, the relation time/space changed drastically. As transportation became even more modern during the twentieth century (better cars, airplanes, and so forth), the city started to be aimed not only by other English cities but also by other countries, which expanded London's visibility.

According to the demographic data presented in the study of Kevin Schürer and Joseph Day (2019, p. 45), "given the number of other countries from which migrants were drawn, London could claim to be *the first global metropolis*." As they state, "in 1851 individuals from 108 foreign countries were enumerated in London, rising to 127 by 1911." (*Ibidem*).

In addition, the British Nationality Act of 1948 made UK citizenship possible to members of the Commonwealth nations and so, people from former British colonies were also going to England, especially to London (Perfect, 2014). Finally, with the advent of complete globalization and the rise of modern capitalism, the location became a worldwide interest to what now represents one of the most multicultural and multiethnic cities that we know. As Perfect (2014) asserts:

London is one of the most diverse cities in the world and one of the most diverse cities in human history. According to data obtained in the 2011 census, 37 per cent of Londoners – some three million people – were born in a foreign country. While the proportion of the city's

population who refer to themselves as 'white' is less than 60 per cent, the proportion who refer to themselves as 'white British' is just 45 per cent (down from 58 per cent in 2001). Those who define themselves as 'mixed race' are, by far, the fastest growing ethnic group. (p. 4).

This can be seen as a fine example of Bauman's second migratory period abovementioned, which has not yet ceased, and one of the results of this process is a place not only composed of mixed races but mixed values, and mixed cultures. This has brought both positive and negative outcomes. The positive aspect was the direction towards a path of more acceptability of what is different, and the negative side would be precisely the opposite, that is to say, the increase of prejudice and xenophobia.

In migration novels, the positive side is often more connected to the *literature of multiculturalism* (a term to which Smith is often related, although she is not fond of the connotation for it may put her in a very narrow sort of category) whereas the latter is sometimes associated to the literature of *minority culture*, although they may sometimes overlap.

One way or the other, London has a long history of cultural conversations, but "while it is crucial to point out that London has never been 'monocultural', this is not the same as saying that it has always been 'multicultural'". (Perfect, 2014, p. 4). In this sense, there is certain bewilderment regarding the concept of multiculturalism, as one could understand that any group of people that coexist among different values and beliefs are multicultural, but this idea is superficial and wrong, because in that case any society could be considered as such, since we are all, in a sense, different. (*Ibidem*).

Therefore, multiculturalism has to do with situations in which intercultural dialogues are inevitable and interfere positively in internal cultures, such as what happens in the migration of former British colonies to London. However, we know there are other circumstances in which multiculturalism also takes place in England's capital, such as all the people coming from countries such as China, Poland, and others. (Perfect, 2014, p. 6).

It is important, however, to underline that all these novels should never be exclusively labeled as migration novels, as if they were only about social aspects perceived in distinct cultures. This would be a reduction of the wider range of literature since novels are, above all, complex stories that depict many different layers of human behavior. With that said, the following part of this study is focused on displaying all these different literary layers in order to understand more deeply all the correlated topics and how they can be discussed in the work of Zadie Smith, especially in the novels *White Teeth* (2000) and *NW* (2012).

PART TWO: THE WRITING OF ZADIE SMITH

1. Tone, Style, and Influences

Born in London, England in 1975, Zadie Adeline Smith (originally Sadie Adeline Smith) is today one of the most respected writers of our time. Since the beginning of her career, she has shown powerful abilities in the literary field. In 2000, her debut novel *White Teeth* was soon considered a masterpiece, winning multiple literary awards including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the Whitbread First Novel Award, and the Guardian First Book Award.

In addition, literary critics Lev Grossman and Richard Lacayo included the novel in *Time* magazine's list of the 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to 2005, along with important works such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and many others. (Grossman & Lacayo, 2010).

Besides the tremendous acclamation of the family saga *White Teeth* (2000), Zadie Smith has had great recognition with other of her novels, being elected a member of the *Royal Society of Literature*[3] and after the great success, she has continued her work writing the novels *The Autograph Man* (2002), *On Beauty* (2005), *NW* (2012), and *Swing Time (2016)*. She also wrote some short stories in the collections *Martha and Hanwell* (2005) and *Grand Union* (2019), as well as the novella *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013) and the books of essays in *Changing My Mind* (2009), *Feel Free* (2018), and more recently *Intimations* (2020).

A striking feature of her works is that they reach popularity addressing complex and important themes that frequently do not reach such a wide range of interest, perhaps because she deftly presents heavy and dramatic topics often with a light tone; that is to say, she writes tragicomedies. In this sense, many of her books namely *White Teeth* (2000), *On Beauty* (2005), *NW* (2012), and *Swing Time* (2016) were national best-sellers and/or international best-sellers.

Among some of the themes portrayed in her works, we can highlight matters of family, religion, class, tradition, race, cultural identity, modern life, and others. With that said, in the introduction of her edited book *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays,* Tracey Walters (2008) underlines:

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[3] According to the official website, the Royal Society of Literature, founded in 1820, "is the UK's charity for the advancement of literature." It is the most important literary organization in Britain and acts "as a voice for the value of literature, engage people in appreciating literature, and encourage and honour writers." (Retrieved from https://rsliterature.org/about-us/)

Smith's engagement with a broad range of themes and eclectic writing style has made it difficult for scholars to define exactly how Smith's novels should be categorized. Critics who observe Smith's indebtedness to writers such as Forster or Woolf associate Smith's work with the British literary tradition and others who identify with her engagement of postcolonial themes of cultural alienation and exile relate her work with the Black British literary tradition. (p. 4)

Truth is that it is not necessary to label a writer into a single category, as they have many different facets to be addressed. This is an expected result of a miscellaneous set of literary influences and ideas. This multiplicity also has to do with globalization, as we now have access to a much wider amount of information, bringing about reflections on themes that didn't use to be part of certain groups and now affect, even if indirectly, a greater spectrum of people worldwide. So Smith herself and her work is already a proper example of our modern and diverse reality.

She addresses, for instance, the life of characters who have to deal with racism, xenophobia, or other types of prejudice, as we often witness in the migrant characters, and at the same time, she may also address classical literary characteristics such as Woolf's stream of consciousness (as in *NW*) or Forster's inner and individual matters of the characters (as in *On Beauty*).

With regard to the global and multicultural spectrum of her work, everything started already before the author was born, for she is the daughter of an English father and a Jamaican mother. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). Likewise, we could say that in *White Teeth* (2000) there is a certain autobiographical element, for instance, in the character of Irie, who is the daughter of the Englishman Archie Jones (a British war veteran just like her real father Harvey Smith) with her Jamaican (like her Jamaican mother) spouse Clara Bowden.

However, as Walters (2008, p. 2) states, "Smith rejected the multicultural title ascribed to her and repeatedly in articles she expressed discontent with the label. While others praised *White Teeth*, Smith was highly critical of the novel calling it 'a fat and messy kid'". In her point of view, she had still a lot to learn in the art of writing, a reasonable observation since she was only twenty-five years old when the novel was first published. But the fact is that although the book doesn't define her style as a whole, it worked as a spur to continue writing about similar matters, even if with distinct perspectives, in some of her subsequent novels, such as *On Beauty* (2005) and *NW* (2012).

One of these matters is undoubtedly *multiculturalism,* which connects to Bauman's *Liquid Modernity*. (Although this is not the only topic related to Bauman's studies). Nevertheless, she should never be reduced (as any other writer shouldn't either) to a limited spectrum, but at the same time, we

understand that writers follow a certain line of thought that is built throughout their works. This line is also defined by their previous experiences as readers.

Influenced by classic writers such as Charles Dickens, E. M. Forster, Vladimir Nabokov, Franz Kafka, Zora Neale Hurston, and Virginia Woolf, Smith has built a significant foundation in the process of shaping her literary identity. In this sense, Walters (2008, p. 2) states that she was "exposed to an eclectic mix of literature ranging from C. S. Lewis's *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* to the Bible's *Old Testament*". As a matter of fact, she displays some overt references to Forster's *Howards End* (1910) in the novel *On Beauty* (2005), as we will discuss in the next part.

As to the contemporary writers, she is most commonly related to Salman Rushdie, especially in *Midnight's Children* (1980) and *The Satanic Verses* (1989), as we will observe later on. In addition, she also relates to a whole new wave of writers who appeared at the end of the millennium and who began to formulate a new postmodern concept in literature filled with dualities and a mixture of styles, resultant from the diversity of the chaotic modern world. In this sense, David Marcus (2013) states:

> The literature of the 1990s and early 2000s was a catchall of voices and styles: experimental and staid, high and low, monumental and grotesque— often all at once. While an older generation of novelists—Peter Carey and Philip Roth, J.M. Coetzee and Ian McEwan, Toni Morrison and Barry Unsworth—retreated to history, choosing to fictionalize the past rather than be consumed by the present, a new group of avant-gardists—Richard Powers, David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Zadie Smith—tried their hand at the now. Inspired by the speculative fiction of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, they sought to write the next BIG NOVEL: fiction capacious enough to contain the wide girth of post–Cold War capitalism. (p. 67)

Authors such as Richard Powers, David Foster Wallace, and Dave Eggers have in common with Zadie Smith the feature of writing ambitious novels filled with references and showing great skills of knowledge in complex combinations of words and ideas. However, this may have put her sometimes in a tricky position when it comes to the literary critics of her work. According to Ammara Khan (2014, n.p.), "Smith was celebrated for her narrative technique with her debut novel, White Teeth, but since then some readers have had a love-hate relationship with her unique style. The form-content argument often comes up in discussions about her work."

For Marcus (2013, n.p.) this greatness in narrative technique might often compromise the element of humanity, that is to say, the proximity with human emotions and with reality, with *the world*

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as it is. Therefore, he upholds that it gets harder for the reader to build a strong connection with the character's emotions, since the story is so concerned with presenting information, getting too technical and resulting in an unbalance between emotions and aesthetic ideas.

Truth is that the majority of the predominantly negative reviews written by Khan (2014, n.p.), Marcus (2013, n.p.), and others about Smith's work were actually spurred on by the harsh criticism pointed by James Wood in his article published in 2001 in the American magazine *The New Republic*. He coined the term *hysterical realism* that refers to a group of contemporary authors such as Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, and some other names which include Zadie Smith. According to him, they present the similar feature of giving more attention to writing techniques and thorough investigations rather than to the feelings and human elements of the characters. These elements would be the real meaning of literature: not to inform, but to entertain the reader and make them *feel*.

In his viewpoint, "storytelling has become a kind of grammar in these novels" (Wood, 2000, n.p.) focusing too much on the structure. As a result, he believes that there is "an awkwardness about character and the representation of character. Stories, after all, are generated by human beings, and it might be said that these recent novels are full of inhuman stories" (*Ibidem*). In this sense, Marcus (2013, n.p.) states that

> James Wood perhaps best captured this line of criticism in his 2000 review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. The problem with "hysterical realism," as he called it, was not only that it imitated the world around it too closely but that it also confused motion for vitality, narrative acrobats for emotional complexity, catalogues of facts for the drama of knowing. (p. 68, our italics).

Regarding Wood's criticism, Smith herself has written an article in response. Firstly, she humbly accepts the term and even agrees partially with the idea by saying that

> it is a painfully accurate term for the sort of overblown, manic prose to be found in novels like my own White Teeth and a few others he was sweet enough to mention. These are hysterical times; any novel that aims at hysteria will now be effortlessly outstripped - this was Wood's point, and I'm with him on it." (Smith, 2001).

However, by no means should we discredit the beauty and greatness of this style that is a result of a different time in history; this is probably the result of our complex and chaotic world, which is completely different from the one where classic writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth century used to live. In addition, Smith makes the wise observation that it is too vague and generalizing to ascribe a single term to so many authors.

Accordingly, we believe that every writer has their own style. In this sense, it is a sloppy and overly simplistic statement to put all these authors in the same category (and such a negative one), trying to create some kind of literary movement that includes some quite important names in literature. In this sense, she states that:

any collective term for a *supposed* literary movement is always too large a net, catching significant dolphins among so much cannable tuna. You cannot place first-time novelists with literary giants (...) some of the writers who got caught up with me are undeserving of the criticism. (Smith, 2001).

Some of these writers who do not deserve the criticism in Smith's viewpoint are for instance Wallace, DeLillo, and Pynchon. And she continues by highlighting that ''we cannot be all the writers all the time. We can only be who we are''. Thus, every single person has their distinct capacities. If these capacities are sometimes considered *too inhuman*, let us remember that, regardless of who did it, they were humans too.

To complement her argument, Smith exemplifies it with DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (1985) and underscores the big influence of television and media on our modern culture. The good thing is that there are still writers doing some kind of art that is less close to the more *commercial* forms:

He argues against silence and intellectual obfuscation. He says: tell us how it feels. Well, we are trying. I am trying. But as DeLillo dramatised (again, in White Noise), it is difficult to discuss feelings when the TV speaks so loudly; cries so operatically; seems always, in everything, one step ahead. Yet people continue to manage this awesome trick of wrestling sentiment away from TV's colonisation of all things soulful and human, and I would applaud all the youngish Americans - Franzen, Moody, Foster Wallace, Eggers, Moore - for their (supposedly) small but, to me, significant triumphs. They work to keep both sides of the equation - brain and heart - present in their fiction." (Smith, 2001).

Moreover, Smith has shown great skill in depicting emotions and connecting with the reader in many ways throughout her writing career, to the point that Wood himself made lots of compliments to her novel *NW* (2012), for example. Marcus (2013) also believes that as she has continued with other novels, she has found in her narratives a wider set of literary styles, such as in *On Beauty* (2005), a novel that differently from *White Teeth*'s alleged acrobatics, presents us the inner and individual issues and reflections of the characters in a way that is closer to the reader.

But even in *White Teeth*, she already presented connections to the characters' emotions, such as Irie's platonic love for Millat or Samad's internal battles for following Muslim dogmas strictly. Wood's term seems, then, somewhat exaggerated and carries with it a quite negative connotation to a book so rich and so important to contemporary English literature. His criticism is perhaps only useful in explaining that Smith's novel has such a strong social and political element that it may at times have brushed aside the characters' internal dramas. However, we do not see this as a failure; it is a matter of style and the focus on which the story is placed. Moreover, let us not forget that art is subjective and, therefore, it will always be subject to different interpretations. Therefore, the opinion of one single literary critic must always and inevitably be seen as an individual perception.

White Teeth's ambition has reached much more positive than negative goals. It is a novel that has opened the doors to the continuity of Smith's work and thus, the wide range of different subject matters in the novel was the initial step for her to go deeper into these and other matters in her subsequent stories. Her novels, which we will discuss in the next part, bring a fruitful range of reflections, not only to the literature of migration but to other social and political matters as well as human factors such as family, love, prejudice, and other challenges of modern life.

2. The Narratives

Although in academic papers Smith is most commonly related to the *Literature of Immigration* (and it is important to highlight that even inside the spectrum of immigration there are several pathways to follow), there is a much broader range of themes to be discussed in her novels and short stories. In this sense, the interpretation of any text is always composed of distinct layers and the same story can be addressed through different angles.

To give an example, if we take a classic novel such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) we can say that it is about the cultural differences between Jamaica and England, which, to a certain extent, has to do with colonialism. However, we could also state that the story is about a woman who

wants to be loved, or also that it is about the process of a woman losing her sanity or about a marriage falling apart, or about the negative effects of chauvinism in a relationship, or about the role of dowries in building a family at that time, or about the *rewriting* of Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), and so on, and so forth.

These are all possibilities that depend on one thing only: *perspective*. All in all, everything comes down to *how you are looking* at something, to what element of the story one wants to see, and go deeper into studying. It is not different from any other author or novel. Just as we chose in this study to connect Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* to Smith's work (especially in *White Teeth* and *NW*), there are several angles through which we can see an account and also many other ways to relate these angles.

In this topic, then, we are going to address some of these possibilities in her work. However, since we are going to study *White Teeth* (2000) and *NW* (2012) with a more intent examination, these two novels are going to be, for now, just rapidly presented so that in the third chapter we can give them more focused attention.

Within this wide range of possible perspectives, we could state, for instance, that *White Teeth* (2000) "chronicles the lives of best friends Archie Jones, a down-on-his-luck Englishman whose failed suicide attempt opens the novel, and Samad Iqbal, a Bengali Muslim who struggles to fit into British society." (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). With that said, Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal are the first representation of *multiculturalism* in the story. The friendship between an English and a Bengali is, to a certain extent, the basis of the narrative, and the fact that they come from different nations (colonizer England and colonized India) is directly related to the focus of this study.

NW (2012), for its part, connects to *Liquid Modernity* in other themes. Whereas *White Teeth* (2000) has to do with multiculturalism and postcolonialism, *NW* (2012) has to do with social inequality and how it interferes in the urban life of Northwest London, a place that is common to both novels. According to Marcus (2013), "one might see *NW* as a consolidation of the exuberant sense of invention in *White Teeth* and *Autograph Man* with the ethical realism of *On Beauty*" (p. 72, our italics). In this sense, *NW* (2012) shows not only a different perspective as also a greater sense of sensibility towards the character's inner and psychological matters.

As to her second novel, *The Autograph Man (2002)*, she presents the life of Alex-Li Tandem, a man who sells and fakes autographs, depicting existential reflections about the vanities of modern life in a narrative that "deals with Jewish mysticism and celebrity obsession." (Walters, p. 2). But the novel is also about grief and religion, as we witness the character of Alex employing the practices of Zen Buddhism to go through the process of accepting the loss of his father, a man who died quite young

and unexpectedly (in a wrestling match), at the age of thirty-six. According to Beatriz Zapata (2020), the novel

> establishes a parallelism between Li-Jin's struggle and the event of the wrestling match, contrasting his quiet death against the spectacle of fame. But in the novel, Li-Jin's death takes centre stage and will be the defining event in Alex's life and narrative." (p. 283)

Therefore, there is an element of criticism and a sad irony for the main character. The irony is that Alex makes false autographs and is obsessed with celebrities and yet, even having such a strong need (or illusion) of being next to fame, his father's death acts as a constant reminder that what really matters to him is the non-famous people, his family, the people who are close to him. They are the real basis of his essence and identity.

In this sense, fame has now a new aspect. Everyone has the opportunity of reaching it through media exposure by using their smartphones. As Bauman (2000) underscores, "the desired life tends to be life 'as seen on TV'" (p. 84) and so the frequent illusion abovementioned is that "it is the lived life that seems unreal" *(Ibidem)*. Thus, it is also a story about the nebulosity of reality and the futility that often operates in our modern and capitalist world.

Smith has developed a great sense of creation with her first two novels (Marcus, 2012, p. 69) and then, she has put into practice other of her literary elements in works such as *On Beauty* (2005), a novel that is considered one of her best works until now. The book was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, one of the most important literary prizes for books in the English language, and won the Orange Prize for fiction in 2006. (Penguin Random House, n. d.).

It is ''a campus novel that focuses on questions of aesthetics, politics, and identity'' (Walters, p. 3) and which depicts an interracial family living the challenging experiences of cultural difference in the fictional university town of Wellington, changing now the scenario from *White Teeth*'s England to the also global reality of the United States.

As James Lasdun (2005) once pointed out, Smith displays "a style at once flexible enough to give voice to the multitude of different worlds it contains, and sturdy enough to keep the narrative from disintegrating into a babel of incompatible registers." Therefore, her third novel continues to follow a style that portrays the diversity of the beautiful yet chaotic modern life. However, there is a new turn concerning her debut novel:

White Teeth had a similarly heterogeneous cast, but whereas in that novel Smith kept it together by keeping it light, with a knockabout comic style (Dickens, by way of Rushdie and Martin Amis), here the intent is to live more inwardly with her characters, and the model, alluded to throughout, is E. M. Forster. (Lasdun, 2005).

In this sense, Smith demonstrates the characteristic of being volatile in depicting similar matters with different perspectives. Connecting her first book with Rushdie and her third with E. M. Forster is in fact an evidence of this volatility. Rushdie, as we will see hereafter, has a style of brooding humor and melodramatic prose, usually offering a nonlinear timeline, connecting different historical events with situations in the story, as we also witness in *White Teeth* (2000).

Moreover, there are also many resemblances between *White Teeth* (2000) and *On Beauty* (2005). Just as in her first, her third book depicts the rivalry between two families that come from different cultural and religious backgrounds and at the same time become intertwined throughout the story, creating a certain paradox of simultaneous distance and proximity. Thus, many characters become friends, despite their differences – a positive outcome of multiplicity.

As to the references to Forster's *Howards End* (1910) in Smith's *On Beauty* (2005), what we see is a resemblance in style in the opening sections, because just as the letters from the character Helen to her sister in *Howards End* (1910), we witness the emails from the character Jerome to his father in Smith's *On Beauty* (2005). In addition, there is the bequeathing of a valuable piece of art from one family to another. *Howards End* is the name of their old inherited house that is left by Ruth Wilcox to Margaret Schlegel and similarly, in Smith's novel Carlene leaves Kiki a treasured painting. (Hay, 2008)

In this sense, Lasdun (2005, n.p.) asserts that "the unruly Belseys, like Forster's Schlegels, become embroiled with another family whose conventional household seems the stolid opposite of their own". According to him, the connection is "in everything from the stately scene-setting passages (particularly where rooms or houses are being evoked) to the most incidental moments" *(Ibidem)*.

With a different viewpoint, Randi Saloman (2021, p. 688) states that when "pushing her reader to reimagine difference as an advantage in interpersonal relations, rather than an obstacle, Smith urges us to read both her own and Forster's novels in this light." What he upholds, however, is that the novels do not follow the same light of thought and that Smith builds an improper connection with Forster. And then he asserts that "Forster's ideal is not a globalised world in which individual distinctions are *erased*, but a world made rich by the conscious realisation of alternatives" *(Ibidem,* our italics*)*.

There is here a contradiction in his words. Isn't Smith's feature of reimagining "difference as an advantage in interpersonal relations" a "conscious realisation of alternatives"? In this sense, "individual distinctions" could not be *erased* by an author who believes in "difference as an advantage". It does not look assertive to imply that Smith's globalized world is made by *erasing* individual distinctions, as it is precisely the opposite: living in plurality does not undermine one's individuality. It may confuse the processes of identification, but individuality is an innate and intrinsic characteristic of each subject.

We do not deny the fact that, as Saloman advocates, there are differences between Smith and Forster. However, the novel *On Beauty* (2005), just as *White Teeth* (2000) and other of her works, is about living (or trying to live) in harmony with differences, but not ignoring the fact that these differences sometimes bring about certain issues. Although there are issues to be addressed, it does not mean that her work brings a negative view of diversity. It shows a positive view, but also a realistic one.

According to Marcus (2013), the turn in style from *White Teeth* (2000) to *On Beauty* (2005) was significantly positive, moving to a more humanistic narrative. He underlines that "she did exchange the maximalist experiments of her early work for a more disciplined and more sober realism." (p. 69). He believes it is "a work of fiction that focused less on "how the world worked" than on "how it felt". (*Ibidem*)

These constructive changes extend to *NW* (2012), in which we witness the lives of four working-class English characters who come from the council state of Caldwell in the *Northwest* of London, hence the title. The novel "satisfies, in many ways, this need for a more *sociological* and also more experimental realism" as it "boldly returns to the metafictional and maximalist experiments of her early years." (*Ibidem,* our italics)

NW (2012) is quite different in form and style in comparison to her previous works. Challenging to the reader, it is experimental and shows other literary components such as stream of consciousness, shifts between first and third person, and screenplay-style dialogue. Not only different in style, the narrative is also innovative in its ambiance, as highlighted by Rachel Cooke (2012, n.p.) when she states that "no one is talking it up as the great metropolitan novel we are all (supposedly) waiting for."

Whereas *White Teeth* (2000), *On Beauty* (2005), or even *The Autograph Man* (2002) portray a wider spectrum of life in a way that draws our attention to the mechanisms of the modern world as a whole, *NW* (2012) gives us a closer look to the characters (as in stream of consciousness), to language and linguistic factors, and to how human interactions operate in people who come from the "same" place, which would be the Estate Council where they live in London. Accordingly, the novel is set in "a

universe away from the roaring, schematic book of her male counterparts" *(Ibidem)* such as Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, or Jonathan Franzen.

With regard to her short stories, *Grand Union* (2019) is an untraditional collection perhaps difficult to decipher. It depicts a whole set of distinct subjects with a vertiginous style filled with references to several layers of knowledge. The American writer Rumaan Alam (2019) makes harsh criticism to the work in his review, stating that some of the tales may in fact "feel more like feints than stories" (p. 42) and that "there is no sense of movement or engagement with anything" *(Ibidem).* On the other hand, he also complements some of its accounts, namely *The Lazy River, Sentimental Education, Kelso Deconstructed* and *For The King,* affirming that they stand "in contrast to Smith's handful of experiments, showing what this author is capable of doing with a few thousand words." *(Ibidem)*

Afterward, the succinct book *Martha and Hanwell* (2005) presents us two short stories namely *Martha, Martha*, and *Hanwell in Hell.* In the former, Martha is an English-Nigerian looking for a place to rent in Massachusetts, USA and thus she makes the acquaintance of Pam Roberts, the realtor who helps her in her search. As to the latter, the story is about Clive Black, a man who is recounting to Claire Hanwell how he met her father, Mr. Hanwell, addressing themes such as race and gender issues. In this sense, Anna Kozak (2014, p. 1) states that "Clive presents a phallocentric perspective by silencing females and describing the non-white races as the 'Other'."

Then, just as many of her previous works, the novella (or perhaps *a longer short story*) *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013) is set in the modern and diverse Northwest London. It was originally published in *The New Yorker* and although it is not very often spoken about, it displays many of Smith's best qualities in storytelling. Differently from her long and wide novels or her rapid and peculiar short stories, this account depicts the life of Fatou, an old maid who works for a rich Asian family and eventually goes secretly to a pool club using guest tickets she steals from her employers. But what most strikes us in her character is strength and resilience. We come across someone who is not the typical victimized refugee, bringing us a brilliantly forward-looking side to this stigma. (Doughty, 2013).

Khan (2014, n.p.) asserts that in this work "the Joycean fragmentation of *NW* is replaced by Forsterian impeccable prose reminiscent of *On Beauty*" (our italics) showing, in a smaller version, the right dose of different subjects. In this sense, "if we look at the ideological significance of the story we'll find issues as diverse as power and inequality, religion and the limits of human empathy, death, and genocide, human suffering and alienation" (*Ibidem*) displaying once more an amplitude of themes.

3. The Essays

Literature is art, and all forms of art are always going to be subjective and therefore, available for multiple and different interpretations; that is to say, people feel it in different ways. All in all, in our study we analyze, first and foremost, the discussions; the social and political reflections prompted by the stories, and how these reflections can positively interfere in our understandings, regardless of personal aesthetic preferences. These matters are often more objectively presented in texts such as essays, which we are now going to put forth.

Changing My Mind (2009) is Smith's first collection of essays, and it shows, among other things, how she is influenced in literature by some of the names above-mentioned. In a mixture of classic and modern inspirations from novels to the television, Sarah L. Courteau (2010, n.p.) states that she "ruminates on literary idols E. M. Forster, Vladimir Nabokov, and Franz Kafka; cinema amazons Greta Garbo and Katharine Hepburn; the late and, in her opinion, stupendously great David Foster Wallace; the craft of fiction; and her own past."

Therefore, there is also a more personal context of the author in this book and how these personal elements relate to her process of creation, which provides a closer look between reader and writer. In this sense, she also appears to be a natural talent when it comes to writing essays. As Courteau (2010, n.p.) puts forth, "a tendency to rift, which can be distracting in her fiction, is an asset here, leading her to make the fruitful associations that are an essayist's stock in trade" and although the manuscripts may have been produced as a result of a specific cultural moment, they are substantial to long-lasting themes.

At the same time, the essays have some particular connections with the novels, since both bring discussions about "identity, flexibility, and the human capacity for transformation." (*Ibidem*). These transformations, however, may often be difficult to deal with. Indeed, we can adapt to new situations brought about in our modern world, but sometimes it takes a lot of time and effort to perceive these matters and therefore have the proper attitudes in order to "fix" them, as it happens in our current liquid reality.

Taking into consideration that the metaphorical term "liquid" has to do with "constant social changes", too many changes may bewilder our capacity of seeing things *as they are* and then solve our issues. In either way, Smith's essays seem conducive in the path towards trying to understand this steady stream of adjustments, because as Bauman (2000) highlights, the first step is to be aware of the existence of the matter.

Likewise, Ismail Muhammad (2018, p.32) states that in her subsequent collection of essays *Feel Free* (2018) Smith believes that "human beings and the world we live in are constantly shifting, forever subject to change." An evidence of this chaotic modernity resultant from the excess of information is the book itself, which is also filled with different layers of information, portraying a curious amalgamation of completely distinct subjects. In a study, "she compares the euphemisms we deploy to talk about climate change ("the new normal" being the most egregious) to elegies; in another, hip-hop's tendency to fixate on material goods becomes a formal condition akin to ekphrasis in epic poetry." (*Ibidem*)

Her second collection is also political, as she points out some of the names that she believes to be relevant, namely the former US president Barack Obama in the essay *Speaking in Tongues*. She underscores that Obama represents racial multiplicity as in the fact that he has a "white midwestern mother and a black African father" (*Ibidem*) and thus, this diversity has migrated "from the realm of art into the halls of power". (*Ibidem*)

In the essay *On Optimism and Despair*, for instance, Smith displays brightness with regards to all progress that we as a society have accomplished, despite the pessimistic analysis done by some critics about her debut novel *White Teeth* (2000). She explains her positive views about multiculturalism and when asked about her alleged turn to despair in the novels that came after the "optimistic" *White Teeth* (2000), she puts forth the following matter:

> When I hear these questions I am reminded that to have grown up in a homogeneous culture in a corner of rural England, say, or France, or Poland, during the seventies, eighties or nineties, is to think of oneself as having been simply alive in the world, untroubled by history, whereas to have been raised in London during the same period, with, say, Pakistani Muslims in the house next door, Indian Hindus downstairs, and Latvian Jews across the street, is thought of, by others, as evidence of *a specific historical social experiment, now discredited.* (Smith, 2018, p. 41, our italics).

By no means should we *discredit* a real historical fact or think that there is not *any bright side* in living experiences of multiplicity. Of course, there are not only positive outcomes to this, but it would be, at the very least, strange to state that there is no relevance to living in an environment of cultural diversity and to think that there is no significant difference between the reality of a homogeneous rural place and a big city as diverse as London.

Besides, it is not solely diversity that prompts rivalry and disagreements, as Smith brilliantly highlights with other examples prior to globalization and multiplicity such as the Ancient Greeks, the Romans, the Northern Ireland, and so forth. With that said, if on the one hand, literary critics claim that *White Teeth* (2000) may be depicted in a utopian or naïve way, on the other hand, "racial homogeneity is no guarantor of peace, any more than racial heterogeneity is fated to fail." (Smith, 2018, p. 42).

Bringing this discussion to modern urbanism as opposed to rural life, we underscore what Raymond Williams states in his book *The Country and the City* (1973, p. 1): "On the Country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved center: of learning, communication, light." In this sense, Smith also brings this optimistic view that the modernized city represents *learning*, *communication*, and *light*.

In contrast with ignorance, knowledge seems to be a better path that represents advancement. With that said, Muhammand (2018) highlights her comment about her father's vision of life. He states that his "resistance to systemic thought, and the cultivation of a sensitivity to the world's specifics, is a way of thinking that resists dogmatism's dangers. The desire to preserve this sensitivity is as close to a mission statement as Smith comes." (p. 33).

Her more recent collection *Intimations* (2020) presents us with six essays that also address a wide range of subjects. As Romano et al (2020, p. 9) underscore, they display both political and human insights, digressing "from a bouquet of peonies to the death of George Floyd, with disarming insight into her own shifting perspectives as woman, writer, mother, and citizen of the world."

Written in the period of lockdown resultant from Covid-19, the book is also about submission. There is a condition imposed on us by the virus and according to Ramos (2021), on some level, this reality opposes the spirit of freedom that is seen in her former collection. However, "the ambivalent nature of submission means one may discover inner liberation even while being subject to a stay-at-home order." (Ramos, 2021).

Therefore, Smith appears as "a sort of John Stuart Mill–style liberal, who defends egalitarianism in the political sphere and the right to 'experiments in living' for individuals" (*Ibidem*) and as it happened in her former essays, this collection brings a closer look to the *person writer*. It provides her inner thoughts more deeply than it is commonly seen in the novels. With that said, almost as in a conversation, she reveals in the forward:

Early on in the crisis, I picked up Marcus Aurelius and for the first time in my life read his Meditations not as an academic exercise, nor in pursuit of pleasure, but with the same attitude

I bring to the instructions for a flat-pack table—I was in need of practical assistance. (Smith, 2020)

Her *need for practical assistance* could actually be a common need for anyone who would want to get closer to Aurelius's stoic philosophy. Accordingly, in many ways, her essays come to vindicate her as a writer that is not only worried about showing great literary skills to impress the public or the *games of words* that are devoid of the human and inner matters, as if she wanted only to achieve the next *big novel*, like previously mentioned, but on the contrary it shows engagement and commitment in creating bonds with real life.

4. Smith and Others: Differences and Similarities

Literary works depict a huge scope of subjects within an infinity of possibilities and every writer has its own peculiarities and style, even if they are presenting the same matter. An author may depict any topic and, therefore, any potential object of study. In this regard, literary studies try to organize the narratives into categories, even though these are wide, subjective, and difficult to establish. For this reason, to contextualize Smith's literary world, we are now going to underline some of the writers who operate in similar directions.

British contemporary authors such as Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Monica Ali, and Kazuo Ishiguro have some affinities with Zadie Smith when depicting motifs such as immigration, multiculturalism, and globalization. Probably, the author who is mostly related to Smith by scholars is Salman Rushdie. According to Rebecca Walkowitz (2009, p. 233), "the burning of *The Satanic Verses* by Muslims in Bradford makes an appearance in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), which signals its homage to Rushdie's style, tone, and subject matter." In addition, the simple reference to *The Satanic Verses* (1988) is not the only association between them.

Although Smith herself has already stated that when she wrote her debut novel, she had not read any of Rushdie's literary pieces (Perfect, 2014, p. 77), they do have resemblances. Some of these connections were soon underlined by many critics, since *White Teeth* (2000), just like *Midnight's Children* (1980), "moves back and forth among time periods, using well-known events from world history as well as private events from characters' pasts to historicize present-day London." (*Ibidem*).

Jean Kane and Salman Rushdie (1996, p. 95) himself state that Saleem, the main character in *Midnight's Children* (1988), "begins his chronicle with the injury to the doctor's nose" and the doctor is

his presumed grandfather. Thus, he "relates two generations of family history before he reaches the events of his own life." (*Ibidem*). The same happens in Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) as we witness Irie's path from the perspective of her prior generations. There is a part in which the narrator in *White Teeth* (2000) depicts Irie's life by stating that "if this story is to be told, we will have to put them all back inside each other like Russian dolls, Irie back in Clara, Clara back in Hortense, Hortense back in Ambrosia." (Smith, 2000, p. 356).

With her own style, however, Smith has her peculiarities. Although both books depict postcolonial motifs, in *White Teeth* (2000) there is not the mythic/magical element that is present in *Midnight's Children* (1988), as the latter depicts characters with special powers. In this sense, Rushdie's *magical realism* differs significantly from Smith's style (Perfect, 2014, p. 77), proving that just because some writers depict the same matter, such as immigration and postcolonialism, for example, it does not mean that they cannot display them in distinct ways.

One might surmise that since all these writers *fit* into the same category, it would be only necessary to read one of them to understand the essence of the others. This absurd assumption is only to explain that it's more reasonable to consider that literary studies compare and scrutinize *related ideas* rather than *equivalent writers*.

For example, Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) might be considered as similar in some ways to the books discussed here, but if we look deeply into Ishiguro's other novels, there are complete differences not only in the topics that are put forth but also in style or even in genre, such as in *The Buried Giant* (2015) which is a fantasy novel. Therefore, even the same writer may often differ in tone or style throughout his/her literary work.

Smith's debut novel has the striking feature of presenting real facts to build criticism on social issues, an element that we also see, for instance, in Kureishi's books. In his short stories collection *Love in a Blue Time* (1996), Jimmy, one of the main characters in the first tale *In a Blue Time*, portrays the difficulties of being an immigrant living in England and far from his roots:

Jimmy's parents were political refugees from Eastern Europe who'd suffered badly in the war, left their families, and lived in Britain since 1949. They'd expected, in this city full of people who lived elsewhere in their minds, to be able to return home, but they never could. Britain hadn't engaged them; they barely spoke the language. Meanwhile, Jimmy fell in love with pop. When he played the blues on his piano his parents had it locked in the garden shed. Jimmy and his

parents had never understood one another, but he had remained as rootless as they had been, never even acquiring a permanent flat. (2010, Kureishi, p. 9)

Likewise, *White Teeth* (2000) displays the matter of *rootlessness* felt by immigrants living in England. Thus, to reestablish the perception of belonging, at least for the reader, she presents us with "the root canals", which are the historical backgrounds of some of the main characters. In addition, Jimmy's parents live in a situation that is similar to Irie's Caribbean mother Clara as well as Magid and Millat's Bangladeshi father Samad. And Jimmy feels like Irie, Magid, and Millat: although they were already born in England, they still feel like outsiders and search for their identities.

Although we do not know much about Jimmy's parents so thoroughly as we know in Smith's root canals of Samad's grandfather Mangal Pande or Clara's grandmother Hortense Bowden, we are aware of the fact that they struggled with issues related to immigration and the reader may imagine a historical background – even if unknown - from Jimmy and his parent's life paths.

On the other hand, these concerns are presented by Smith in a way that also exhibits how this reality is gradually gaining a new direction, in which immigrants are not depicted only as a minority but as a group that mingles and co-exists with others in England. As the world becomes more globalized, social life changes and, therefore, matters also change. In this sense, Smith often addresses not only the adversities in finding roots but also other common challenges of existence.

According to Walkowitz (2009), although both authors present real historical events (such as World War II), Smith seems to bring a more optimistic conception in comparison to Kureishi's novels. (And here we are by no means criticizing Kureishi's work, we are just highlighting the differences in literary tone between him and Smith). Her novel is more inclined to a category of *Multiculturalism* rather than to *Cultural Minorities*, as "novels of minority culture tend to emphasize difficult experiences of separateness, prejudice, and 'making do' rather than 'conviviality,' a term Paul Gilroy employs to describe the *fluid*, heterogeneous, sociability we find in the novel of multiculturalism." (Walkowitz, 2009, p. 225, our italics).

Thus, Smith's multicultural novel does not carry the main goal of demonstrating the division between natives and immigrants. It displays their fusion as humans and so there are different dilemmas involving these social interactions that go beyond cultural or geographical barriers. It goes toward multiple directions such as the psychological concerns regarding individuality, fluidity, and uncertainty.

These multiple topics are also underlined in other works such as Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* (2009). According to Margarida Pereira (2016, p. 77), this is a novel in which "the colonial, postcolonial

and neocolonial cartography of the city of London is metonymically contained in the space of the hotel's kitchen." However, as the other writers mentioned hitherto, Ali also displays her individual features. Whereas Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) presents a tragicomic style often with an ironic reference to real events, Ali's novel acquaints us with multiculturalism compressed in a single room of a building and also with the ingredient of mystery: the homicide of a worker in the kitchen's basement as the center of the plot.

Accordingly, there are distinct paths chosen to represent migration. Not only in *In the Kitchen* (2009) but especially in *Alentejo Blue* (2006), Ali portrays the migratory process in "other routes and other places within Europe that remind us that the migratory movements are themselves more heterogeneous and multiple than the traditionally considered ones based on centre/periphery models." (*Ibidem*)

Therefore, in the age of diaspora and liquid society, everyone connects and disconnects; people shift from their *original zones* in a less obvious context. Differently from the Bangladeshi and Caribbean going to England in Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), what we see here is people from *the center* searching for new horizons in other countries (*periphery*) such as the small village in Portugal shown in *Alentejo Blue* (2006).

It is an utterly different scenario from the one we observe, for instance, in Ishiguro's above-mentioned *A Pale View of Hills* (1982). The novel "takes aim at British stereotypes about Japanese character, at assumptions about the tranquility and desirability of English rural life for Asian immigrants, and at immigrant and native fantasies of pastoral 'Englishness' rooted in soil and blood." (Walkowitz, 2009, p. 224). In this sense, the novel addresses migration to rural England, differently from Smith's urban scenarios.

Other distinct subjects are reflected in the book such as war's aftermath, trauma, and differences between Japanese and English mores. Nevertheless, as Michael Molino (2012, p. 323) highlights, the novel also "resembles other twentieth-century novels that shift between specific moments in a character's experience and memories of past moments vividly, faintly, or problematically recalled" as in some novels abovementioned. Thus, again we perceive simultaneous differences and similarities between these writers.

In this sense, a writer might be influenced by others but might also draw discussions that were already brought before without even being aware of it. However, regardless of the writers' awareness or unawareness of previous registers, novels (as well as any other texts) are, to a certain extent, always *re-*

writings, *re*-inventions and thus, every text is an intertext. In his classic essay *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes (1977) states that

> a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture. (p. 146).

Therefore, when Smith, Ishiguro, Rushdie, or any other author writes, they are inevitably putting into words the ideas that they have developed through the readings of previous writers. And not only writers but also anyone, regardless of who they are, can potentially influence others since we live in a world of constant social interactions that build our discourse. Nevertheless, even though Barthes believes that writing and creator are completely unrelated, each *person writer* has their individualities that make one text different from another, as we see in these authors. But they vary more in tone and style rather than subject matter. Similarly, Matei Calinescu (1997) highlights that

> the repeated reading of certain classics over time generates the idea of rewriting them and, more importantly, that rewriting ideally asks for rereading, or for the kind of attention that is characteristic of reflective rereading, both in regard to the master text and to the text that is derived from it. (p. 243)

So when Smith *rewrites* Forster in *On Beauty* (2005) in its postmodern approach, the only difference between any other novel that is not *apparently* influenced by some great author or by anyone is that these influences are not explicit but implicit. Accordingly, postmodern novels usually show an explicit reference to literary classics, creating new models of re-signifying previous texts and demystifying the fact that all writing is a form of re-writing.

These and other novels portray, among other things, the issues of the globalized world in which the concept of distance and time develops a new look and a representation of a *liquid society* in which everything moves constantly. Salman Rushdie, for instance, also displays these global relations with his peculiarities. According to Russell King et al (2003), his writing shows

what it is like to be a post-colonial cosmopolitan, whilst not ignoring the wider histories and geographies of migration and diaspora. As well as demonstrating the globalisation of migration—in which a move from middle-class Bombay to London may be less of a cultural jolt than a migration from a remote Welsh hamlet to London—Rushdie also, tragically, provokes the global backlash of religious fundamentalism. (p. 7).

Globalization of migration and *religious fundamentalism* are both themes portrayed in Smith's literature and are, to a certain extent, connected. They are intertwined because as we have said before, religious fundamentalism is spurred on by factors such as crumbling traditions (as Giddens puts forth) and these, for their part, are a result of a liquid world in which social patterns are gradually becoming more nebulous.

The *globalization of migration* in a liquid reality shows that all contemporary novels are, to some level, interrelated. If literature is a portrait of society and now what we see is a society of steady networks and connections, it is inevitable to keep a territorial culture in a single story, without being influenced by all the constant interactions of the modern world. In other words, we could say that not only London but the whole globe is little by little turning into a single and multicultural place.

Therefore, Smith might have more in common to the names mentioned hitherto, but probably many other writers (if not to say *any* writer) from other countries and other cultures are related to her and vice-versa. With that said, we are now going to present more explicitly the relationship between Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* and Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and *NW* (2012) and how they distinctively connect to this social concept.

PART THREE: LIQUID MODERNITY IN *WHITE TEETH* AND *NW*

1. **White Teeth**

White Teeth (2000) is an ambitious tragicomic novel that portrays the life of three families – the Jones, the Iqbals, and the Chalfens – crossing through different generations and different cultures in the beautiful and diverse scenario of Willesden, London. Depicting historical events, real-life facts, and political insights, the fiction is often referred to as a *family saga*, for its wide and long story with many characters, layers, and concerns such as identity, friendship, cultural differences, immigration, urban life, race issues, gender issues, science *versus* religion, tradition and other matters that relate to our mixed and chaotic modern world.

The novel circulates around the friendship between Archie Jones, an English man, and Samad Iqbal, a Bengali Muslim man. They met when they were serving in the Second World War and after many years, they still maintain the bond, often going to O'Connell's, a traditional pub where they chat, relax and reveal to the reader many of their thoughts and opinions towards life.

Archie has a daughter with Clara Bowden called Irie and Samad has the twin sons Magid and Millat with his wife Alsana Begum. The third family, lastly presented, is formed by the Jewish and intellectuals Marcus Chalfen, an important professor, his horticulturalist wife Joyce Chalfen and their son Joshua, who studies at the same school as Irie, Magid and Millat. As the story grows and consolidates, the three families intertwine, looking different as social beings but quite similar as human beings in their challenges.

It begins with Archibald Jones attempting to commit suicide, as a result of a profound frustration of divorcing his then wife Ophelia, after thirty years of marriage. He tries to die by inhaling the gas from his car, but before reaching his goal he is saved by an unknown butcher who does not want any trouble next to his workplace. After this deliverance, he believes that the world gave him a second chance at life and this is when he meets the much younger Clara Bowden, daughter of a devout Jehovah's witness, and who, very rapidly, becomes his second wife. (Krolewski, 2019, n. p.).

As a Muslim and a Bengali, Samad struggles to maintain his cultural and religious customs to himself on English soil. He is obsessed with the possibility that his great-grandfather is *Mangal Pande*, a Hindu man from real-life history who was responsible for the first shot of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Samad tries his best to convey the Bengali tradition to their offspring but all his attempts are unsuccessful. In Samad's eyes, ten-year-old Magid looks more promising, and therefore, he sends him

back to Bangladesh in the hope that he will keep the family traditions whereas Millat stays in England. (Krolewski, 2019, n. p.).

However, what happens is that Magid becomes an atheist keen on the sciences and who is more and more inclined to Englishness. Ironically, rebellious Millat is the one who gets closer to Islam but in a negative way that Samad does not approve, that is to say, being part of a bigoted group of Muslim fundamentalists called *Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation* (KEVIN). (Krolewski, 2019, n. p.).

The Joneses and the Iqbals connect with the Chalfens when Irie and Magid are caught smoking marijuana at school and as a punishment, they have to participate in study sessions at the house of the young Joshua. The couple is quite welcoming and compassionate with Irie, Magid, and Millat at the expense of their own son Joshua, who feels deserted. (Krolewski, 2019, n. p.).

Marcus works on a polemical genetical project called *FutureMouse* in which he inserts chemical cancer-causing agents into the body of a mouse to scrutinize the progression of a tumor in living tissue. By doing this, he believes that he can predict the next steps in the advancement of a tumor in order to prevent complications in real life similar situations. As they become more involved with the Jewish family, Irie and Magid turn out to work for Marcus's project, but his son Joshua decides to rebel against his father by taking part in a radical group of animal rights known as *Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation* (FATE). (Krolewski, 2019, n. p.).

Meanwhile, after arguing with her mother about her desire of going to Africa, Irie decides to go live with her grandmother Hortense Bowden and Ryan Topps, Hortense's assistant who also lives there. They are very devoted Jehovah's witnesses and strongly believe that the end of the world is coming soon. Although they seem to be narrow-minded, Irie respects them and maintains a healthy relationship in her new address. (Krolewski, 2019, n. p.).

Afterward, Irie has intercourse with Millat and then with Magid, becoming pregnant with a baby that represents the last generation in the story. She does not know who the father is and neither does the reader, as this information is open to interpretations. Regardless of who the father is, she starts dating Joshua, who had feelings for her all along. Thus, she decides to live with him and her son in Jamaica. (Krolewski, 2019, n. p.).

The story ends at the announcement of the *FutureMouse* Project on New Year's Eve of 1992 to 1993, an event to which some of the characters are opposed for distinct personal reasons. Not only Marcus's son Joshua Chalfen and the FATE group are against the project, but also Millat and KEVIN as well as Hortense Bowden and some Jehovah's witnesses she brings with her. While they try to sabotage

the event, something unexpected happens. Samad realizes that one of the doctors participating in the announcement is Marc-Pierre Perret, or Dr. Sick, who happens to be Marcus's mentor. (Krolewski, 2019, n. p.).

Previously mentioned in the story, he is the doctor whom Archie had to kill in the war but secretly did not, and so this fact is revealed to Samad after many years. Millat tries to shoot the doctor, but Archie jumps in front of him and is struck in the thigh while the *FutureMouse* escapes from its cage. Since they are identical twins, the witnesses are not able to identify whether the perpetrator of the crime was Millat or Magid and thus both are sentenced to community service. (Krolewski, 2019, n. p.).

For being a tragicomedy, the whole story is portrayed throughout the novel with a brilliantly light and meek tone. As Perfect (2014) states,

> What is perhaps remarkable about the opening pages of *White Teeth* is that they immediately introduce such weighty issues as madness, divorce, suicide, and being utterly convinced of the pointlessness of one's own existence, and yet by rendering each of these *familiar* the tone of the narrative is able to remain unremittingly jovial. (p.84)

This idea of pointlessness is directly related to *Liquid Modernity*, which brings about insecurity as well as the lack of form and values. Therefore, many of the matters depicted throughout this plot are associated with the fact that we now live in a global and multicultural world. A reality without the barriers that it used to have before creates new barriers to a world in which everything changes constantly, resulting in a feeling of chaos. In this sense, we are now going to build these relationships between Smith's novels and Bauman's concept in a pragmatic course.

1.1.   Identity, territory, and capitalism

> *'And then you begin to give up the very idea of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this belonging, it seems like some long, dirty lie ... and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an accident. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?' (Smith, 2000, p. 407)*

'Rootedness', if any, can there be only dynamic: it needs to be restated and reconstituted daily - precisely through the repeated act of 'self-distantiation', that foundational, initiating act of 'being in travel', on the road. (Bauman, 2000, p. 209)

When we think about identity, inevitably we have to think about location. We think in location because we build our psyche in relation to the environment where we live and the people with whom we interact; this is how our culture is defined. Paradoxically, then, to form our own individualities, we need others to create a parallel of how *they* are and how *we* are. However, what we see today is that this range of interactions has extended in unlimited proportions. Even Mars is now aimed by us. Therefore, how can we strongly *belong* or connect to such a colossal set of available options?

In Smith's quote above, the character speaking is Samad Iqbal, a Bengali Muslim from Bangladesh living in London, England. When our *territory* changes, we change as well, but without forgetting our former values and education. If we thought about Samad in a different historical period, we could by no means think of him living in another country or even in another city. All types of transportation are precisely the reason for this interaction to happen between two (or more) different cultures.

Carriages, cars, boats, or planes, all of them have initiated a process that has never stopped: the process that we can call an *expansion of human geography*. These and other factors of our modern life form a new kind of capitalism that is wider. In this sense, Bauman (2000) affirms:

Under the new circumstances, the odds are that most of human life and most of the human lives will be spent agonizing about the *choice of goals*, rather than finding the means to the ends which do not call for reflection. Contrary to its predecessor, light capitalism is bound to be value-obsessed. The apocryphal small ad in the 'Jobs sought' column - 'Have car, can travel' - may serve as the epitome of the new problematics of life. (p. 61, our italics).

If one has a car and can travel, that means their new dilemma is no longer trying to find a way to transport to another place but to choose what place they are going to. This *choice of goals* now represents literally the whole world. It is a result of what Bauman explains as a shift from *heavy capitalism* to *light capitalism*. In contrast to heavy capitalism of solid modernity, the new obsession in light capitalism is based on value, representing a big change in the way we perceive life. We have

already reached a point in which we have not only cars, but many of the things we wanted and so now the preoccupations are about what path to follow.

Perhaps Samad does not understand that what prompts his feeling of *not belonging* anywhere is the fact that we now belong everywhere. Therefore, now more than ever we feel that *birthplaces are accidents* because since we are born we can potentially be anywhere, and even if for financial reasons one could not be physically in another place, they can virtually. Moreover, trying to fight against the new fashion is pointless, as it is absolutely impossible to avoid such a social phenomenon.

Samad's inquiries about where to go or what to do are agonies about *choices of goals*, not literally about what place to go but about what values and social patterns to follow. Thus, he is not *finding the means to the ends*. As expected, he suffers from the burden of living in a liquid world shifting from heavy capitalism, a period related to order, control, and certainty to light capitalism, our current period of dynamism, freedom (or the illusion of it), and uncertainty.

In this sense, Bauman (2000, p. 58) states that in heavy capitalism, "capital was as much fixed to the ground as were the labourers it engaged" whereas "nowadays capital travels light - with cabin luggage only, which includes no more than a briefcase, a cellular telephone and a portable computer." (*Ibidem*). Exemplifying this with entrepreneurs, we can say that the American Henry Ford represents the former, with his big companies fixed to the ground and employees working in the same place until retirement, whereas Bill Gates represents the latter, with dynamic worldwide companies with no physical bonds (Bauman, 2000).

Thus, the act of *being in travel* that Bauman points out is a non-stop condition and the first action to soften this new existence is consciousness. Being aware of this steady state of changes is essential to our development and therefore to prevent us from a future of ultra-individualistic humans with no standards.

However, Samad is oblivious to this predicament. In a state of great bewilderment, he does not understand the wideness of liquid and extraterritorial life. What he tries to do is to collect all the efforts to maintain his previous values, culture, and religion to his twin sons Magid and Millat. The boys, in turn, also share a feeling of *rootlessness*, as they did not have their parents' *solid* education. In fact, they are living and interacting with English people while having traditional Muslim parents from Bangladesh.

As a result, these and other characters search for their own identity amidst the chaos of postmodern cosmopolitan London. In this sense, regarding Smith's writing, Muhammad (2018) puts forth:

she has dedicated herself to describing the constant, churning exchange of cultures that renders any concept of identity ultimately unstable. To Smith, identity will always lapse into the impurity of cultural exchange. The hard work is to construct meaning out of that disorder once you realize that the myth of cohesive identities is a crutch. (p. 32, our italics).

Especially today, identities are much broader, and this complexity is quite overt in young characters such as Irie, Magid, and Millat. They search for identity, lighting, and acceptance. These teenagers are essentially the pure outcome of a multifaceted world built by the *impurity of cultural exchange* and the *expansion of human geography*. With that said, it is valid to observe some of these characters in the novel through the light of Bauman's contrast between what is solid and what is liquid.

1.2. Solid and Liquid Characters

In *White Teeth* (2000), some of the main characters, normally from the older generations, partially represent Bauman's *Solid Modernity*, for having strong and well-determined social values, whereas predominantly the younger ones represent *Liquid Modernity*, showing dynamism and nebulous social standards. Other characters are more complex and difficult to frame within this range of concepts, therefore staying somewhere between the two poles. Although we know that characters are subjective, we would like to schematically present this parallel with the following charts to give us a notion of how Bauman's concept relates to the human elements in the story.

SOLID MODERNITY	
General Considerations: Clarity of values; they know (or seem to know) exactly what to believe in and how to behave because they have chosen a specific *life model* to follow. The negative side is that they struggle with the new *dynamic* reality of the modern world and may often feel like they are falling behind.)	
Character	**What makes him/her predominantly solid**
Samad Iqbal	Being perhaps the most solid character in the novel, he wants to keep his Muslim and Bangladeshi conduct by perpetuating it to his offspring. However, to a certain extent, he is also in-between the poles, as he oscillates between his own values and the occidental temptations, especially with regards to sexual desires.
Alsana Iqbal (née Begum)	Although being in a pre-arranged marriage, she is headstrong and quite certain about her opinions and often disapproves some aspects of western culture. She thinks that some matters of conjugal life are better solved with silence, but does not accept or submit to her husband's attempts to impose his visions.
Magid M. Iqbal	Probably the only young character that is more inclined to solidity. Very strong-minded, he decides to pursue everything that relates to *Englishness*. It is the path he follows even without his father's approval. In fact, he confronts his father's will to make him a Muslim man. Differently from his brother, he truly identifies with the morals he has chosen.
Marcus Chalfen	He shows solid dedication to scientific studies. In addition, he has well-determined principles for being part of a traditional Jewish family. He identifies with Magid's serious and formal style.
Joyce Chalfen	She also shows solid dedication to science as a horticulturalist. For being also a traditional Jewish like her husband, she worries about the overt lack of direction and sense of duty in Millat's behavior, trying to *save* him from what she considers to be negative inclinations.
Hortense Bowden	Although she is very kind and compassionate to her granddaughter Irie, she represents probably a more negative side of *solidity*. Because of her inevitable life path in Jamaica, she looks narrow-minded due to her obsession with Judgment Day. Moreover, she is also persuaded by Ryan Topps, a man who lives with her and is also obstinate with religious dogmas.

Table 1: Solid Modernity characters

	LIQUID MODERNITY

General Considerations: Bewilderment and uncertainty, but with a more open mind; they are constantly searching for their identity amidst the excess of information and possible paths to follow. In this sense, they long for connections to what they think makes sense to them, trying to build meaning to life.

Character	What makes him/her predominantly liquid
Archibald (Archie) Jones	Although he comes from a solid reality of being a soldier in the Second World War, he displays great insecurity towards life, especially for making big decisions by flipping a coin. Therefore, he prefers to abstain from the responsibility of choices.
Clara Bowden-Jones	She rebels against her pre-determined religion of the Jehovah's Witnesses, but still feels insecure. Even after deciding to be an atheist, she feels bad for being disintegrated from religion, maintaining a search for a *savior*, someone to whom she could create a connection and build a purpose in life. (Krolewski, 2019).
Millat Z. Iqbal	He is desperately searching for connections and finds himself lost between western and eastern culture. By taking part in a bigoted and extremist religious group – KEVIN, he tries his best to follow all the rules but keeping himself away from his former life of detachment to standards is extremely hard for him.
Irie Ambrosia Jones	Displaying great insecurity and low self-esteem, she struggles with her sexuality and racial identity for being different from the majority of the English white girls. Divided between her Jamaican family past and the current reality of multicultural London, she tries to connect with the Chalfens and to find answers with her grandmother Hortense.
Joshua Chalfen	Feeling rejected by his own father who looks more connected to Magid, he manifests against his genetic project *FutureMouse* by taking part in FATE, a group that fights animal exploitation. However, just like Millat, he also finds himself in a divided position as after a while, he is not certain of whether he agrees with FATE's ideals or not.
Irie's daughter	Although we do not know anything about her path (as it is still to happen after the end of the story), Irie's daughter represents the future. Therefore, she is probably more than any other character, a personification of *uncertainty* and *liquidity*. On the other hand, she also represents hope of new horizons.

Table 2: Liquid Modernity characters

There are some important considerations to underscore regarding these two charts. To begin with, some characters are "more solid" than others, although they are all in the solid column. Likewise, some characters in the liquid chart might appear to have "more liquid" features than others, although they are all in the liquid definition.

In this sense, there is also a combination of solid and liquid characteristics that creates a third line. These characters look more blended within the definitions abovementioned as they have some certainties in life, but they also get a little confused with the abundance of possibilities. Thus, let's focus on three characters that could be framed in-between the two poles: Archie, Clara, and Samad.

Archie is probably the most divided; the character that is closest to the middle between solid and liquid. He has lived in times of solid modernity and thus created some solid grounds during the Second World War. However, after many years of a lasting marriage, he sees himself divorced and starts a relationship once again with the different and younger Clara. This whole new life that is suddenly presented to him creates a distinct feeling to his standards. Therefore, a man who was already inclined to insecurity (as he already had the habit of flipping the coin) is now even more inclined to doubts towards the world around him.

With regards to his wife Clara, what puts her between the poles is the fact that she decides not to be a Jehovah's Witness. This decision could be considered quite solid, as she is certain of what she wants and what life model to go after. But since she does not feel entirely secure with the new decision, she automatically shows the liquid component of uncertainty.

Lastly, we could say that although Samad is inserted in this liquid reality of mobility, he is not in the middle of the two poles. He is more inclined to show traits of solid modernity with only a little liquid characteristic in personality: his secret temptations to western culture. But although he has some temptations, that is most of the time what they are, only temptations that do not occur, desires that exist but do not come true. For instance, he behaved quite wrongly according to the Muslim traditions or simply to the general morality when it comes to his infidelity, but at some point, he has decided not to continue in his relationship with the music teacher Poppy Burt-Jones.

In the end, his solid values put him in the *right* place. In fact, he is so solid that even when he starts to develop desires for Burt-Jones it was, besides her beauty, because of her interest in his culture. They were in a meeting in the school where Magid and Millat studied, and she agreed with him about having more Muslim festivals as opposed to other religious events. He wanted to remove The Harvest Festival and she agreed with his motion. This was one of the first things that caught his eyes on her:

'I just wanted to say that I thought you made a good point, you know,' she said, chucking her thumb over her shoulder in the direction of the hall. 'In the meeting. The Harvest Festival always seemed so ridiculous to me. I mean, if you want to help old people, you know, well, vote for a different government, don't send them cans of Heinz spaghetti.' She smiled at him again and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. 'It is a great shame more people do not agree,' said Samad, flattered somehow by the second smile and sucking in his well-toned 57-year-old stomach. 'We seemed very much in the minority this evening.' (Smith, 2000, p. 132).

Therefore, Samad is predominantly a solid character, but this is only to show that even the most solid person is never entirely solid. People and society are complex and have many layers. Besides, they always present differences among them, for instance, the generation gap between parents and their descendants.

In this sense, one of the differences between Samad and his sons is their relationship with time. For Magid and Millat, time creates changes all the time, they feel like they are in a steady stream of new information and ideas. However, for Samad, time passes but, in a way, he is still the same, and therefore, he is also lost as he does not know how to convince his offspring that his values are the best option. Paradoxically, then, whereas Samad tries to build some values with Magid and Millat, they learn with the society around them that values and ideas are constantly changing and that is not beneficial to be stagnant.

When Samad decides to send Magid to Bangladesh, he thinks he has more chances to succeed, and the best option seems to be making him find a root in his place of origin. However, when he returns after eight years, he ironically arrives looking more English than ever and even Samad's wife Alsana, who did not support the idea of sending her son abroad (in fact, he did it without telling her), looks quite baffled when she realizes that there are very significant changes in Magid's behavior:

"I don't recognize him", said Alsana to Clara in confidence, after he had spent a few days at home. "There is something peculiar about him (...). Samad says this is some clone, this is not an Iqbal. One hardly likes to touch him. His teeth, he brushes them six times a day. His underwear, he irons them. It is like sitting down to breakfast with David Niven." (Smith, 2000, p. 424)

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The concept of being an Iqbal is very different from the concept of looking like the fancy British actor. Moreover, the biggest irony is that the other son Millat, who has always been a rebel and did not seem to fit in some Bengali cultural tradition, becomes closer to religious fundamentalism joining the bigoted members of KEVIN. It was, for his father, the worst way of building a connection with Islam. As Perfect (2014, p. 88) states:

Critics have noted the irony of Millat's involvement with the Keepers of the Eternal Victorious Islamic Nation – who are described as 'an extremist faction dedicated to direct, often violent action, a splinter group frowned on by the rest of the Islamic community' (p. 470) – being heavily motivated by the very icons and values of popular Western culture that he claims to denounce" (Perfect, 2014, p. 88)

Thus, again, although Millat is closer to his religion, it is in a way that Samad does not approve and, like his father, Millat suffers an identity crisis because of his temptations with western culture, such as the American movie actors (Al Pacino, Ray Liotta, and others) whom he often mirrors. Samad feels like he did not do the right thing, that he did not educate his sons as he should have. He thinks that they were raised with too much liberty or too much protection. A fine example is that before knowing about how Magid came back as a sheer English, Samad thought to be making a good decision:

They live in big plastic bubbles of our own creation, their lives all mapped out for them. Personally, you know I would spit on Saint Paul, but the wisdom is correct, the wisdom is really Allah's: put away childish things. How can our boys become men when they are never challenged like men? Hmm? No doubt about it, on reflection, sending Magid back was the best thing. I would recommend it. (Smith, 2000, p. 219)

What he did not understand was that *there is no big plastic bubble*. It is precisely the opposite: modern life has destroyed any possible kind of bubble since there are no barriers anymore. Meanwhile, Millat finds himself divided but somehow learns (or tries to learn) to continue living according to both western and eastern cultures. As a result, the next challenge is to build his identity. In the end, then, no individual is categorically solid or liquid and regardless of any typification, all characters from the book (as well as all of us, real human beings) live today in postmodern liquid times. Therefore, we can never forget that the historical period in which we live is the major factor to these social concepts.

1.2.1. Young Characters and Their Process of Identification

In different academic fields, there is a lot to say about identity and identification. The connection that we bring to a discussion in this dissertation between sociology and literature is proper to these matters. Some of the scholars pointed here, such as Bauman, Eagleton, and Williams, are quite interested in analyzing socio-cultural processes of identification. With that said, it is important to also stress the considerations made by Stuart Hall in social studies and then, relate them to *White Teeth*. The best way to construct this is through some of her characters in the novel.

Irie, for instance, struggles with her self-image as opposed to the thin British female body structure. If we take into consideration that identity is often related to *identification,* Stuart Hall (1996) highlights that this relationship can be seen in two distinct ways:

> In common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. In contrast with the 'naturalism' of this definition, the discursive approach sees identification as *a construction, a process never completed* - always 'in process'. (p. 2, our italics).

In this sense, one's individuality is always a process, and a constant process, because "there is no identity but made-up identity" (Bauman, 2000, p. 179). If we bring this reflection to Irie, the first thing to say is that she did not identify with the physical pattern of British females and that she is closer to the discursive approach of identification, that is to say, she is *constructing* her self-knowledge:

> Irie Jones was obsessed. Occasionally her worried mother cornered her in the hallway before she slunk out of the door, picked at her elaborate corsetry, asked, 'What's up with you? What in the Lord's name are you wearing? How can you breathe? Irie, my love, you're fine — you're just built like an honest-to-God Bowden — don't you know you're fine?' But Irie didn't know she was fine. *There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land.* (Smith, 2000, p. 266, our italics).

To look at identification as something *in process* makes more sense in a liquid and modern world rather than in times of solid modernity. Therefore, it is difficult to *build* an identity in a place

where one feels different. In times in which the geographies have much fewer boundaries, what may happen is to be "a stranger in a stranger land." This is, in a sense, a constant and general feeling worldwide; it is not needed to be in Irie's position to feel this way. Still, Irie is a stranger for being in a different place, so she is a stranger to the others, but she is also in a stranger land because others are strangers to her.

If the natural concept of identification is too simplistic, the *continuous process* of identification is, on the other hand, difficult to handle. This is one of the topics where we see a crisis. As we have pointed out through the light of Bauman's reflections, there is a paradox: Absolute freedom is all we want, but being completely free creates a prison of not having standards to follow, resulting in a great feeling of uncertainty.

Irie is free to be whomever she wants and still, she feels an outsider. It should not be that way, but the positive side is that this *process* is still happening, not only with Irie but constantly with everyone all the time, and so we as humans, are getting better at the process of amplifying the possibilities of identification. To a certain extent, then, our society is evolving; prejudice is progressively diminishing while acceptance grows faster.

People are now more mixed and less segregated, as a result of globalization. There are challenges but these are always going to exist. In another previous historical period, Irie would not even have the chance to *be* somewhere else. Although she feels like a stranger, living in another place prompts her to consider other social and cultural experiences with a positive look. As an example of multiculturalism, she is expanding her *process* of identification and breaking up with the natural concept mentioned by Hall.

With protective behavior, her mother tries to make her understand her roots building a connection to the Jamaican biotype. It is how she believes to be the best way to make her daughter feel identified. She is using the naturalistic concept of identification, in which people see each other, identify each other as equals and feel safe and accepted. Therefore, although we state that Clara is predominantly a liquid character, she is, in this case, more of a solid figure, if we put her in contrast with her daughter Irie. Taking into consideration their distinct generations and distinct social environments, they look at identification through antagonistic perspectives.

Other characters that we would like to address in the process of identification are Millat and Joshua. They search for ways to identify with others by taking part in closed groups. Millat goes to KEVIN, an extremist Islamic group; and Joshua goes to FATE, a group that tackles animal exploitation.

Both groups have in common the opposition to the project *FutureMouse* created by Joshua's father Marcus Chalfen.

They try to identify with the other members, but there is an issue: at some point, they feel divided between their own opinions and the groups' opinions. This is precisely how one builds their own identity, that is to say, by making their own conclusion towards the world in comparison to the visions from others. It is the discursive approach of identification; it takes time and effort, but it is needed for the process of one's individuality.

Millat tries very hard to have a perfectly *solid* (probably *too solid*) and well-established lifestyle by following four rules created for anyone who wanted to enter KEVIN:

1. To be ascetic in one's habits (cut down on the booze, the spliff, the women).
2. To remember always the glory of Muhammad (peace be upon Him!) and the might of the Creator.
3. To grasp a full intellectual understanding of KEVIN and the Qur'ān.
4. To purge oneself of the taint of the West. (Smith, 2001, p. 444)

However, there was a huge problem: *the fourth rule*. He was just too fond of the Western culture; and so how could he choose not to like something? It is a matter of taste, an internal feeling. It was too hard for him. As it is pointed out,

He knew that he was KEVIN's big experiment, and he wanted to give it his best shot. In the first three areas he was doing fine. (...) But even as Millat reflected on this with pride in his mother's hallway, his heart sank. For therein lay the problem. Number four. Purging oneself of the West. Now, he knew, he knew that if you wanted an example of the moribund, decadent, degenerate, over-sexed, violent state of Western capitalist culture and the logical endpoint of its obsession with personal freedoms (Leaflet: Way Out West), you couldn't do much better than Hollywood cinema. And he knew (how many times had he been through it with Hifan?) that the 'gangster' movie, the Mafia genre, was the worst example of that. And yet . . . it was the hardest thing to let go. (Smith, 2001, p. 444-446).

Millat grew up having access to a massive content of western entertainment, watching movies, programs, listening to American songs, wearing their clothes, and, of course, living in London and doing

most of the things all English people do. With that said, he finds himself in a great conundrum. His difficulty is caused by the strict criteria from the KEVIN group. But he knows what his tastes and habits are.

When we say that the group is *too solid* it is because it does not fit with the liquid world where we live; it is just too strict, too old-fashioned, too closed, and strange. Modern life is filled with dynamism, changes, and it is a time of acceptance, of open minds. That is exactly the opposite of what the Islamic group believes to be the best way to live. It would perhaps be much wiser for the group to change the rules, modernize them, if they wanted to have more participants. On the other hand, that would break their idea of "living with certainties."

Regarding the parallel of being similar or different, Bauman (2000, p. 176) states: "The aspect in which we are all alike is decidedly more significant and consequential than everything that sets us apart from one another; significant enough to outweigh the impact of the differences when it comes to taking a stand." This is why Millat *takes a stand* of staying in the group; for the simple reason that it is better to identify with what is similar rather than identifying with what is different. This is, therefore, a type of small *community*.

Thus, the best way to live today (or at least the easiest) is through *volatility*. This is what Millat does. Although he knows he is in a bigoted religious group, he needs to find his ways of identifying, which has to follow a more malleable approach. This is because

> the *volatility* of identities, so to speak, stares the residents of liquid modernity in the face. And so does the choice that logically follows it: to learn the difficult art of living with difference or to bring about, by hook or by crook, such conditions as would make that learning no longer necessary. (Bauman, 2000, p. 178, our italics).

The same situation happens with Joshua when he tries to join FATE. It all comes down to *community* and as Williams (1973) would say, they have always existed. It does not matter if it is a nation-state, a city, or a small group of people. The difference between Millat and Joshua, in this case, is that Joshua chooses to enter the group as a result of not succeeding in identifying with his father, a person with whom he was, in fact, supposed to create a bond. The small community that would be his own family, father and mother, is not doing its job. Since communities are necessary, he tries something else.

Nevertheless, just like Millat, he has difficulties in following every single criterion established by the group, especially the fact that he is not certain anymore if what his father does to the mice, for the sake of science, is really such a morally serious mistake. Thus, the reason that prompts Millat and Joshua to have difficulties in building their identity and taking part in communities is quite clear. As Williams (1973, p.165) states, it is because "identity and community became more problematic as a matter of perception and as a matter of valuation, as the scale and complexity of the characteristic social organization increased." That is to say, after globalization and modernization, things have naturally turned wider, and therefore, more *liquid*. Hence the importance of volatility.

When Joshua entered the group he knew, just like Millat knew in KEVIN, that "life for FATE members was difficult, dangerous and punctuated by frequent imprisonment". (Smith, 2001). Still, he wanted to feel part of something, he was searching for identification. However, of course that at some point he would find it quite hard to keep all his opinions in harmony with the group's opinion. Like Millat, he started to develop his own sense of identity, his individuality, and, as a result, starts to question some of the standards of this association. Completely lost, he finds himself divided between the group and his father at the very moment of the attack on the *FutureMouse* project:

> So looking at Marcus up there with his magnificent mouse, celebrating the great achievement of his life and maybe of this generation, Joshua can't stop his own perverse brain from wondering whether it is just possible that he and Crispin and FATE have misjudged completely. That they have all royally messed up. That they have underestimated the power of Chalfenism and its remarkable commitment to the Rational. For it is quite possible that his father will not simply and unreflectingly save the thing he loves like the rest of the plebs. It is quite possible that love doesn't even come into it. And just thinking about that makes Joshua smile. (Smith, 2001, p. 525).

In this sense, Joshua understands that he needs to build his own opinions, his own personal views. He now takes into consideration that maybe he does not agree with all the values from FATE. So, part of who he is apparently may identify with his family. It is a process spurred on by Crispin, the group's leader. He understood that he did not enjoy hearing other people mocking his family's peculiarities:

Joshua bitterly regretted telling Crispin about this little idiosyncrasy of his family, their habit of referring to themselves as verbs, nouns and adjectives. It had seemed a good idea at the time; give everybody a laugh; confirm, if there was any doubt, whose side he was on. But he never felt that he'd betrayed his father — the weight of what he was doing never really hit him — until he heard Chalfenism ridiculed out of Crispin's mouth. (Smith, 2001, p. 494).

Similarly to Irie and Millat, Smith shows that as Joshua has social interactions, he makes choices, and these choices are what create the discursive processes of identification highlighted by Hall. Magid, on the other hand, seems to be the most solid figure among the young characters or at least, the most certain about his values. As the resolute person that he is, when he goes to O'Connell's, his father's favorite traditional Muslim Bar, he asks for a bacon sandwich, knowing that this would be against his father's religious standards:

'All right — what about mushrooms and beans? Omelette and chips? No better chips in the Finchley Road. Come on, son,' he pleaded, desperate. 'You're a Muslim, int ya? You don't want to break your father's heart with a bacon sandwich.'

'My father's heart will not be broken by a bacon sandwich. It is far more likely that my father's heart will break from the result of a build-up of saturated fat which is in turn a result of eating in your establishment for fifteen years. One wonders,' said Magid evenly, 'if a case could be made, a legal case, you understand, against individuals in the food service industry who fail to label their meals with a clear fat content or general health warning. One wonders.'

All this was delivered in the sweetest, most melodious voice, and with no hint of threat. Poor Mickey didn't know what to make of it. (Smith, 2001, p. 450-451).

Besides having a very well-established process of identity, he knows exactly how to argue against the Muslim command of not eating pork. He knows he does not identify with this rule, followed by his father, and has many arguments against it. In fact, he is much more identified with science and rationality, some of the characteristics he has in common with the Jewish Marcus Chalfen. Differently from Marcus's son, Magid truly identifies with every aspect of his lifestyle. They build a very strong friendship and when Marcus is going to meet him for the first time at the airport, after exchanging letters for a long time, he knows that they are going to continue this striking relationship for the simple

reason that they are fond of scientific studies, something that gains the upper hand in matters of *faith*, in comparison to religious faith:

> They would save each other. This couldn't be faith could it, Marcus? He questioned himself directly on this point as he scurried along. For a gate and a half the question unnerved him. Then it passed and the answer was reassuring. *Not faith, no, Marcus, not the kind with no eyes. Something stronger, something firmer. Intellectual faith.* (Smith, 2001, p. 422, our italics).

Magid's process of identification with Marcus Chalfen matches perfectly with the values and ideas he already had because they are similar in many ways. In this sense, although he shows difficulties in connecting with his father Samad, when we compare his process with Joshua's and Irie's, it was much easier for him to find affinities with someone else.

1.2.2. The Volatility of Relationships

Some of the agonies created by the *choice of goals* are also seen in a character that is not young but is quite liquid: Archibald Jones. When he tries to commit suicide – a decision he has made by flipping a coin – his agonies are translated into randomness. In this sense, Archie displays great insecurity towards the capacity of making choices, as other matters in his life are also decided in the same manner. To make such an important choice, which should be the most relevant of one's life, he chooses to abstain from the responsibility. However, he does not die:

> The thinnest covering of luck was on him like fresh dew. Whilst he slipped in and out of consciousness, the position of the planets, the music of the spheres, the flap of a tiger-moth's diaphanous wings in Central Africa, and a whole bunch of other stuff that Makes Shit Happen had decided it was second-chance time for Archie. Somewhere, somehow, by somebody, it had been decided that he would live*.* (Smith, 2000, p. 4)

To his own surprise, he remains alive and however nothing more mattered to him, he meets Clara, a woman who brings him positivity. Just like the randomness chosen by him when flipping a coin, it was also unpredictable that he would meet her. From two completely different realities, they

marry, and thus Clara's appearance in Archie's life is, to a certain extent, what prompts him to move on with his second chance in life. The main idea is that things happen by chance and there is no way to control them:

> A dark line would now be drawn underneath the whole incident, underneath the whole sorry day, had not something happened that led to the transformation of Archie Jones in every particular that a man can be transformed; and not due to any particular effort on his part, but *by means of the entirely random*, adventitious collision of one person with another. Something happened by accident. That accident was Clara Bowden. (Smith, 2001, p. 23, our italics)

Not only is Archie's salvation random but also other events throughout the story reveal this feature of depicting sudden fluctuations and, although Perfect (2014, p. 78) has stated that many critics point out an "overly predictable" plot, the matter here is not to discuss if the plot is predictable but if the facts were predictable *to the characters* in the story, and the fact is that they were not. Maybe some readers would already be expecting some events to happen, and this is not necessarily an issue. But the characters did not know these facts. They were random to them. Archie was not expecting that he would live nor that he would marry again.

According to Appadurai (2019), "the heart of the new traumas of the forced refugee in the new country is that he/she has a plot (a narrative or a story) but no character, identity, or name." (p. 1) To a certain extent, this applies not only to refugees but to many people who decide to live in another country. They have a plot, which in this case would be their life, but they search for new processes of identification and these new processes are unplanned. Therefore, it was also random for Clara that she would meet and marry Archie. It is random that she is English. Her mother came from Jamaica to live a new life and so she was born there; she could not know these facts in advance. Like Archie, she also had a past relationship; it was in her adolescence with Ryan Topps:

> Clara was from somewhere. *She had roots*. More specifically, she was from Lambeth (via Jamaica) and she was connected, through tacit adolescent agreement, to one Ryan Topps. (...) There was Clara and Ryan for eight months before Clara and Archie were drawn together from opposite ends of a staircase. *And Clara might never have run into the arms of Archie Jones if she hadn't been running, quite as fast as she could, away from Ryan Topps.* (p. 27, our italics).

In his book *Liquid Love*, Bauman (2003, p. 6) once highlighted that modern individuals are "despairing at being abandoned to their own wits and feeling easily disposable, yearning for the security of togetherness and for a helping hand to count on in a moment of trouble, and so desperate to 'relate'". The biggest issue is that at the same time and paradoxically, they are "wary of the state of 'being related'" (*Ibidem*).

In our case, they did not have many changes in relationships. Archie married twice and Clara had had only one boyfriend before him. However, what we could apply here is the desperation for finding someone to connect with, the striking necessity to have "a helping hand to count on." When they meet, Archie starts to see light in life again and Clara, in her turn, sees her new partner as some kind of *savior*, someone she *needed*.

> Clara was not like Hortense. Yet a residue, left over from the evaporation of Clara's faith, remained. *She still wished for a saviour.* She still wished for a man to whisk her away, to choose her above others so that she might Walk in white with Him: for [she] was worthy. Revelation 3:4. Perhaps it is not so inexplicable then, that when Clara Bowden met Archie Jones at the bottom of some stairs the next morning she saw more in him than simply a rather short, rather chubby middle-aged white man in a badly tailored suit. Clara saw Archie through the grey-green eyes of loss; her world had just disappeared, the faith she lived by had receded like a low tide, and Archie, quite by accident, had become the bloke in the joke: the last man on earth. (Smith, 2001, p. 45, our italics).

Liquid life demands changes. Life changes and so does Clara. In her process of identity, she feels more comfortable in stopping being a Jehovah's Witness. However, she still has some remnants from her mother's religion, which happen to reflect in her new relationship and in the way she sees her new partner.

These were some practical examples of how we see contemporary life through the glasses of Smith's first novel. As we have said, these are lives lived in multicultural London, a city that properly represents this dynamism, and so, the second novel that we are going to scrutinize is quite connected to *White Teeth*, but not in terms of the plot; the story is completely different. However, it is a novel that also shows the many facets of modern urban life, this time giving a higher emphasis to the inner matters of the characters. It is, then, to a certain extent, more inclined to psychological elements as opposed to social elements, but also bringing the latter to several discussions.

2. NW

Elsewhere in London, offices are open plan/floor to ceiling glass/sites of synergy/wireless/gleaming. There persists a belief in the importance of a ping-pong table. Here is not there. Here offices are boxy cramped Victorian damp. Five people share them, the carpet is threadbare, the hole-punch will never be found. (Smith, 2012, p. 31).

Hardly ever is work expected to 'ennoble' its performers, to make them 'better human beings', and rarely is it admired and praised for that reason. It is instead measured and evaluated by its capacity to be entertaining and amusing, satisfying not so much the ethical, Promethean vocation of the producer and creator as the aesthetical needs and desires of the consumer, the seeker of sensations and collector of experiences. (Bauman, 2000, p. 139-140)

Smith's novel *NW* (2012) connects to Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* in different ways in comparison to *White Teeth* (2000), as the book depicts other subject matters. With that said, we will be focusing now on themes such as work, capitalism, and social inequalities and how this can possibly interfere with human behavior socially and psychologically. When the narrator states that "here is not there", it is highlighting these inequalities at the same time as it shows that the desire to have a *better* job can many times be entirely financial due to consumerism, as opposed to working with the goal of evolving ethically and as a human being.

In this sense, Marcus (2013, p. 70) states that "while set in the same neighborhood as White Teeth, NW is no longer concerned with the ambiguities of identity but with the clear, determined aspects of inequality: those determinacies born out of where we live and what we do." The Irish writer Anne Enright (2012, n.p.) also makes a comparison not only with her debut but with all her earlier work. She points out that "Smith's previous novels have been exuberantly plotted, and were resolved in a highly 'novelistic' way. This book is much more tentative and touching in its conclusions." In this sense, the novel brings an innovative component, not only in its plot but also in language, style, and reflections. What is similar to her other novels is her brilliant "ability to absorb philosophical ideas." (*Ibidem*).

Another difference is the geographical scope. The whole story is set only in a specific part of London, and multiculturalism is there but more as a common fact. Although we also see elements of immigration (such as the character of Michel who's French-Algerian, Leah's parents who are Irish, or

Natalie's parents who are Jamaican), this is not the only focus. As Smith (The Guardian, 2018, n.p.) has once stated, "a lot of things that happened in England over the past three centuries can be found in north-west London in miniature: enclosure, industrialisation, suburbanisation, immigration, gentrification..."

This is not only about *how it is the be an immigrant* as it is more preoccupied with the matters of characters *as individuals*, that is to say, with depicting the inner battles of these human beings, regardless of where they come from. As Kristian Shaw (2017, p. 3) underlines, "while the older generation of *White Teeth* continued a tradition of postcolonial displacement, characterised by a lack of agency and belonging, the protagonists of *NW* enjoy a more bounded and abiding relationship with the spaces of their locality."

NW is experimental and depicts the lives of four adults living in the urban and poor reality of London, the *North West* of London. Leah, Natalie (who used to be Keisha before changing her name), Felix, and Nathan are portrayed by using different writing styles, narratives, and techniques, alluding to the multiplicity of modern life and the individuality of the characters. All four figures have in common the place they come from: The Council Estate of Caldwell. What they do not have in common is their paths in life. In this sense, we are able to capture a sort of infinite gap between them, highlighting the idea that inside each person there is a whole unique world.

The book is divided into five parts: *Visitation, Guest, Host, Crossing,* and again *Visitation*. The first chapter is about Leah Hanwell, a woman who is deceived by a scammer who takes thirty pounds from her, showing her naivety but also her good heart. In addition to this event, we get to know that Leah does not want to get pregnant but keeps this information in secret from her husband Michel by taking contraceptive pills. Besides narrations and dialogues, this first part is also filled with her thoughts which are presented through stream-of-consciousness.

Guest is focused on the life of Felix Cooper. He used to be a drug addict but since he met his new girlfriend Grace, a very positive person, he now wants to live a new life that is filled with plans and ambitions. However, he is tragically killed in an armed robbery. With regards to the literary style, we could say this chapter is closer to a classical approach, as it is told in third-person narratives and dialogues, however without dashes.

The chapter *Host* displays the life of Leah's old friend Keisha/Natalie Blake, a very determined and strong-minded woman who has reached all her personal goals, especially in her professional life as a barrister. Natalie is married to Frank, also a successful man, and has two children with him. Her life seems perfect in the eyes of Leah, who secretly envies her social ascension. Nevertheless, Natalie

somehow feels a great emptiness that prompts her to betray her husband with online sexual partners. What is perhaps most peculiar in this chapter is the form, as it is all told through small, numbered sections of distinct events from her life.

Crossing is dedicated to what happens after Frank finds out about Natalie's betrayals. Natalie becomes desperate and lost, wandering on the streets of her old neighborhood, worried about what to do next. She is about to commit suicide by jumping from a bridge, but Nathan Bogle, a former classmate who became a drug addict, finds her and avoids it. While interacting with him, Natalie starts to suspect that he is apparently involved in some kind of dishonorable business.

Finally, in the last chapter *Visitation* Leah's husband Michel finds out about the pills Leah has been taking. He struggles to understand why she did not tell him. He calls Natalie who goes to their home and talks to Leah. In their conversation, besides talking about Leah's struggle with her husband they also talk about Nathan and the fact that he is probably involved in the armed robbery that killed Felix. In sequence, the story ends when they decide to inform the police about Nathan.

It is worth noting a peculiar theme addressed in the book: time. As we read the story, we feel that there is a constant feeling of *nostalgia*, as the book switches from past and present moments, showing how the past influences the characters' present life or future perspectives. There is also the idea of how moments in life seem to last in childhood, almost like time would pass more slowly, whereas in adult life, as we get older and consumed by so many obligations and interactions, time seems much faster and more dynamic, to a point in which we feel like we are constantly reminded of our path towards death. As Enright (2012, n.p.) underlines, even the language, especially in Leah's chapter, is presented with short sentences to give us the notion of our "modernist anxiety about one thing following another, about the ticking of the clock."

Another interesting component in the novel is that, similarly to *White Teeth* (2000), the story does not present us with a *grand finale* filled with surprises and mind-blowing plot twists; that kind of ending most readers expect. Designedly, the book holds the postmodern feature of depicting *life as it is*. Although it is a fiction, the events and themes presented are quite common to ordinary life. It is realistic (and therefore, closer to the modernists' aspirations of realism) in the sense that life is much more complex than what those classical fictions with predictable beginning, middle, and end show us. And this is not a criticism of any other literary movement, just a statement about their differences.

Because of this style, the book brings us closer to social reflections, almost like some kind of *sociological novel*. Hence, the link to matters brought about by Bauman, Williams, and others. In this

sense, we now bring some of these discussions into our study through the observation of the four main characters and their individual elements.

2.1. Keisha/Natalie Blake: Desires and Achievements

A striking theme that relates Smith's *NW* (2012) to *Liquid Modernity* is *consumerism* as a result of modern capitalism. This matter is quite clear in the novel through the character of Keisha/Natalie. Natalie is very determined to reach wealth and, in fact, she achieves all her goals. She represents, among other things, not only the necessity to evolve professionally but the modern *desire* to consume.

As Bauman (2000) highlights, our modern and liquid lifestyle "is no longer the measurable set of articulated needs, but desire - a much more volatile and ephemeral, evasive and capricious, and essentially non-referential entity than 'needs', a self-begotten and self-propelled motive that needs no other justification or 'cause'." (p. 74). In this sense, Natalie does not want to be rich because she physically needs it. It is a psychological need: she wants to fulfill all her *desires*, an illusion created by capitalist standards.

Keisha/Natalie has an extreme desire to ''live the good life'', that is to say, of having all the luxuries and advantages that a rich person can have. She reaches a commendable job, but it apparently does not bring her fool happiness. In this sense, Marcus (2013) states that the novel

> seeks to render not only the cognitive disorder of postmodern experience but also the social and psychological disorders of postmodern—that is, *post–welfare state–capitalism.* Instead of Joyce's roving and associative stream of consciousness, Smith's is empirical, cartographic, and sharply focused on the spiritual trauma and *material limits of poverty*." (p. 70, our italics).

These *material limits of poverty* are precisely what Natalie mostly tackles. Probably the most *solid* character, she has their standards very well defined and goes in the opposite direction from that of her childhood. In fact, it is not by chance that she changes her name. She changes it because, in her point of view, the new life demands it. Also, the name Keisha would easily show her background of a poor and black woman from an Estate Council of a London many people do not know.

Therefore, Natalie is a proper example of an individual from our contemporary *achievement society*, as opposed to Foucault's *disciplinary society*. To explain this more clearly, it is crucial to highlight these concepts in the words of the South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han in his essay *The Burnout Society* (2010):

Today's society is no longer Foucault's disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks, and factories. It has long been replaced by another regime, namely a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories. *Twenty-first-century society is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society* [Leistungsgesellschaft]. Also, its inhabitants are no longer "obedience-subjects" but "achievement-subjects." They are entrepreneurs of themselves. The walls of disciplinary institutions, which separate the normal from the abnormal, have come to seem archaic. (p. 8, our italics).

There is no institution forcing Natalie to wake up early in the morning and work hard in order to get what she wants. Natalie herself is constantly pushing herself to the limit. She is literally *her own entrepreneur*. By living in a reality that privileges consumerism at the expense of almost any other social value, she naturally understands that in order to be successful, she needs to do her best and ascend from a poor life to a richer life.

Just as it was pointed out by Bauman, she is living the agonies of the absolute freedom of postmodernity. The double-edged sword of being totally free is also underscored by Han (2010) as what he calls *paradoxical freedom*. She is free to choose her path, but there are too many options. This reality when tied to the idea of constant production creates the distressing feeling of never reaching the final realization.

Being disciplined and determined is commonly a positive feature and her determination is indeed commendable, but it is useful to reflect about its causes and about where stands the healthy limit one should not cross. In this sense, the narrator states in the novel:

It was clear that Keisha Blake could not start something without finishing it. If she climbed the boundary wall of Caldwell she was compelled to walk the entire wall, no matter the obstructions in her path (beer cans, branches). This compulsion, applied to other fields, manifested itself as "intelligence". Every unknown word sent her to a dictionary – in search of something like "completion" – and every book led to another book, *a process which of course could never be completed.* (Smith, 2012, p. 180).

The idea of success is now related to the idea of nonstop performance. Keisha/Natalie is the type of person who could easily suffer from Burnout Syndrome, and a social element that probably

contributes to this outcome is the excess of information. Keisha/Natalie, just like all of us, has access to loads of possibilities in a steady stream of ideas. Socially, then, as a kid she used to behave with her friends as if she knew everything; as if she could answer any question, because to some extent, she unconsciously thought she had to know everything. She is Han's *achievement subject*.

In this sense, the narrator comes out with the question: "Wasn't it possible that what others mistook for intelligence might in fact be only a sort of mutation of the will?" (Smith, 2012, p. 180). There could not be a more proper provocation. The answer is not simple, but as it is highlighted, "there is a connection between boredom and the desire for chaos. Despite many disguises and bluffs perhaps she had never stopped wanting chaos" (Smith, 2012, p. 308). It may or may not be the case of a *mutation*; but one thing is certain: our modern world is one of the reasons for this probable mutation to take place.

2.2. Leah Hanwell: Money *versus* Humanity

Whereas, on the one hand, Natalie is highly focused, on the other hand, Leah is a dreamer; an introspective figure who idealizes a more humane world. In fact, differently from what Bauman sees happening in most of the cases in modern life, she has a work that ennobles her as a human being. With that said, she struggles to deal with some of the modern liquidities as, for instance, the way she sees money, differently from the way her husband Michel sees it:

Currency trading. *The exploitation of volatility*. She can only understand words, not numbers. The words are ominous. Add them to that look Michel has, right now, of arrested attention. Internal time stretched and stilled, inattentive to the minutes and hours outside of itself. Five minutes! He says it irritably whether thirty have gone by or a hundred or two hundred. Pornography does that, too. Art, too, so they say. Leah stands behind Michel in the darkness of the box room. Blue shimmer of the screen. *He is two feet away. He is on the other side of the world.* (Smith, 2012, p. 50, our italics).

Once again we come down to *volatility*. Michel is quite interested in the volatility of virtual money, the currency trading. Just like Natalie, he wants to ascend. And so he tries to make money distancing himself from the real, physical world. It is a different world now. There is a constant and indestructible *world wide web* around us. As we have stressed, it is no longer necessary to act in a

complete physical or material manner, but by the ease of the internet. It is then, a different kind of capitalism, in which territory has a different meaning. The volatility is not only in the money but in the spatial notion.

However, although she is not interested in the advancements of commerce, deep down she grudges Natalie's perfect (or at least perfect to her eyes) life of success. She lives, then, an internal battle. She does not know how to reach the plenitude of natural human happiness in a reality where happiness seems to be reached only through consumerism. It is also paradoxical that she helps other people in her profession but the only way to do it is, in a way, by assisting them financially.

Money, as it is highlighted by the author "has become notional, a notion materialist Hanwell – who kept his real paper money in a cardboard box in a mahogany credenza – would never understand." (pp.50-51). Therefore, to a certain extent, we observe the idea that "the freedoms afforded to us—the liberties of the market—are in fact working against us, making us less, not more, free" (Marcus, 2013, p. 70), as it is inevitable not to desire *a better life*.

Leah is by no means less moral or less intelligent than any of us, she just wants to live a good life. Regardless of social class, everyone wants to have access to the things that are considered the food to our unsatisfied bellies. With that said, Bauman (2000, p. 88) highlights that "in a synoptical society of shopping/watching addicts, the poor cannot avert their eyes; there is nowhere they could avert their eyes to."

She could not long for anything else. On the contrary, it is clear that "the greater the freedom on the screen and the more seductive the temptations beckoning from the shopping-mall displays, the deeper the sense of impoverished reality, the more overwhelming becomes the desire." (*Ibidem*).

On the other hand, what is most striking in Leah's personality is that although she envies Natalie's financial success, she is extremely empathic with the suffering of others, especially with the scammer woman Shar, who cunningly takes some of her money. Her humanity is overt when she finds the poor woman and, still, tries to help her in her despair:

–What you want from me? What you want me to say? I robbed you? I'm an addict. I stole your money. All right? ALL RIGHT? –Let me help, maybe I can . . . there are places that . . . that help. Leah cringes at her own voice. *How feeble it is! Like a child pleading.* (Smith, 2012, p. 55-56, our italics).

Leah then tries to explain that she works with charity and that she has some contacts, but the addict goes away with a piece of paper with the phone numbers in her pocket. Accordingly, here we see a light: the positive element of compassion. Although we all want more and more, we may also understand the agonies of the distinct layers of social class. Leah understands *how feeble* and vulnerable someone can be and as Kristian Shaw (2017, p. 7) highlights, "by demonstrating a commitment to her area, working for a non-profit charity organisation helping local communities, Leah positions cosmopolitanism to require individual agency and performative *acts of socio-cultural engagement.*"

As we have stressed, the narrative style and the themes portrayed in the first chapter *Visitation* give us a closer geographical look, less wide than what we see in *White Teeth*. Therefore, Leah's concerns make us notice "a more *fluid* conception of localised and pluralised routes that tie individuals to area and fellow residents." (*Ibidem,* our italics). Moreover, by showing Leah's stream-of-consciousness, the novel displays a closer look at what is sensitively human.

Even her odd behavior of secretly taking contraceptive pills is humane. Regardless of being or not a righteous thing to do, it displays our insecurities. Indeed, it is indisputable that she is free to choose what to do with her body; however, Michel seems like a good man and she knows he wants to have kids, so she could at least have told him. The reason why she doesn't is complex (as is the human mind) to the point that the novel leaves this matter open to interpretations.

It could be possible that she was just avoiding a conflict, that she was afraid of telling her husband the truth exactly because she knew how bad he wanted to be a father, and so she did not know how his reaction would be. Whatever it is, she does not want to talk about it. In the last chapters of the book, after his husband finds out about the pills and she is having some kind of blocking that made her stop talking, Natalie tries to talk to her. Once again Leah was feeling compassion for others:

"Nobody's arguing. I'm trying to understand what's really the matter with you. I don't believe you're sitting here flirting with skin cancer because you don't want a baby." Leah turned in her hammock and showed Natalie her back. "I just don't understand why I have this life," she said, quietly. "What?" "You, me, all of us. *Why that girl and not us. Why that poor bastard on Albert Road. It doesn't make sense to me.*" Natalie frowned and folded her arms across her body. She had expected a more difficult question. "Because we worked harder," she said. (Smith, 2012, p. 335-336, our italics).

This quote displays two things. Firstly, it shows that Leah is changing the subject about babies as she does not feel comfortable with this subject; she literally says: "let's talk about something else" (*Ibidem*). The second element is that it becomes more than clear how different Leah and Natalie are. It denounces how distinctively people see reality. In this sense, individuality is always going to exist no matter how diverse the world is.

While Leah is worried about Shar and Felix trying to understand their *fate*, Natalie is more practical in this sense. She does not see the situation as some kind of world injustice, because in her point of view they were responsible for the things that happened to them. For Natalie, people build their own path through their actions and every action has consequences. Therefore, to a certain extent, she upholds the simplistic idea that *working harder* is the best way to achieve happiness and fulfillment. It is what she has always done. It is, for her, what brings personal and, above all, financial success.

2.3. Felix Cooper: Love, Hope, and Tragedy

Felix Cooper is a good man who wants to improve his life and what prompts him to do it is his new girlfriend Grace, a nice young lady who is constantly feeding him with positive energy. However, he unexpectedly finds himself defied by a dark side of the big city, that is to say, the reality of violence. He dies as a result of living in a place of crime, but more precisely, in a part of the city – the North West – that is economically inferior to the center of London.

The fact that this area is underprivileged makes all the difference and, once again, we are faced with the capitalist conundrum of social disparity. Therefore, "Felix is indicative of the socio-economic inequalities existing within London, constantly passing consumerist symbols of the capital's wealth to which he is denied." (Shaw, 2017, p. 11). Although he wants to change his perspective in life by stopping using drugs, working in a proper dignified job, and enjoying the presence of his new love Grace, he keeps being constantly reminded that he is still socially underprivileged and that this is always going to be an issue.

While he is going to say his goodbyes to his ex-girlfriend Annie, the reader has contact with some other secondary characters of Felix's family and neighborhood through conversations that put forth social reflections. One of these conversations takes place when he is leaving his father's decrepit home where he has just paid a visit and as he goes out, he starts a dialogue with the neighbor Phil Barnes. At some point in their interaction, Phil gives him a sort of *linguistic reminder* about the social differences inside London, highlighting the "capital's wealth to which he is denied" (*Ibidem*):

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"They always say 'youth' don't they?" said Phil and stopped once more, halfway down the stairs, in a thoughtful pose. Felix leaned against the handrail and waited, though he had heard this speech many times. "Never the boys from the posh bit up by the park, they're just boys, but our lot are 'youths,' our working-class lads are youths, bloody terrible isn't it? They come round here, Felix (...) the police come round here asking after our kids (not our kids, literally, obviously our kids are long gone) but the community's kids, looking for information, you know. Save their big houses on the park from our kids! It's shameful, it really is." (Smith, 2012, p. 114-115)

And here we point out two sad ironies related to Felix's life story. The first is that his brother Devon has once committed a crime. Although he knows that it is a prejudice to call the young boys from his area as *youth* – a pejorative term in comparison to the term *boy* – his brother was, in fact, a criminal. However, it is indeed quite shameful to know that the police are selective in this sense. It denounces a reality of prejudice towards all the *community's kids*, for they classify them in one single category. As Phil says, they need to *save their big houses on the park* at the expense of a whole group of young people, often destined to failure.

In this sense, we come down to the second fatal irony: Felix himself is killed as a victim of a crime that was committed by a man from his own community. This event displays the vulnerability, built in a cycle. The same way as his brother did not behave properly by breaking the social rules, Felix suffered because of another person from the same area who *also* did not behave properly. In the end, it is more than clear that people have different opportunities and that everyone is vulnerable, including their peers. He has had his savior Grace (even her name *Grace* is allusive in this sense), but he has also had his *dis*grace, which is allegedly connected to a crime in which Nathan Bogle was involved.

On the other hand, we could look at this tragedy as the inevitability of the risk. It is not good to die, of course; no one would desire death unless something was wrong. Nevertheless, the modern concept of total freedom is not able to give anyone total security, because this would imply living in a different type of imprisonment, like some sort of closed city where people would have the control of who enters and who leaves (similar to George Hazeldon's city abovementioned). With regards to community, Bauman (2000) highlights:

In the long and inconclusive search for the right balance between freedom and security, communitarianism stood fast on the side of the latter. It also accepted that the two cherished human values are at odds and cross-purposes, that one cannot have more of one without surrendering a bit, perhaps even a large chunk, of another. (p. 182).

In other words, to be completely free also means to take risks. Historically speaking, violence has always existed. There was never a period in which people could be certain that they would go out on the streets and come back alive. Therefore, there is no other way to live other than choosing between *freedom and security.* However, it is also true that when we live in an underprivileged area, the probability of suffering from crime is higher. This is another result of capitalism, a world in which the rich have access to neighborhoods that are more protected by law enforcement (and also by surveillance apparatuses).

But although he is a victim, the striking element of compassion (somehow similar to Leah's) appears when he looks at the robbers. He understands that those people are the result of a difficult life of little opportunities and compares them to his past life of drugs and no perspective:

"Listen, I ain't giving you nothing. Nothing!" He found himself on the pavement. As he got back up on his knees he heard one of them say, "Big man on the train. Ain't the big man now." And *instead of fear, a feeling of pity came over him*; he remembered when being the big man was all that mattered. He reached into his pockets. They could have his phone. (...) *They could have it all. Everything he cared about was elsewhere.* (Smith, 2012, p. 171, our italics).

After boldly saying that he was not going to give them his belongings, his thoughts denounce the cycle abovementioned; a constant cycle of how it is to be vulnerable. Once he was worried about being a big man working in the film industry, and there is nothing wrong with wanting to ascend. But then he remembers that he has Grace, the woman he so truly loves.

He puts a world of consumerism at a lower category of relevance in comparison to his personal realization because *everything he cared about was elsewhere.* In this sense, he goes through a moment of lightning. Thus, although he is constantly reminded about how destitute he is, at the end of his life he is saved from this stigma, he breaks through this concept and goes beyond, understanding what is really important. The "wealth to which he is denied*"* (Shaw, 2017, p. 11) is no longer an issue.

2.4. Nathan Bogle: Finitude *versus* Expectations

It is interesting to think that in the two last chapters of the novel, we observe a considerable opposition between two characters: Natalie Blake and Nathan Bogle. Natalie here represents success and ascension whereas Nathan symbolizes failure and despair. Nathan lives such a miserable life that he does not even have the chance to be properly portrayed in the book. The reader does not know much about him, and this may have been done purposefully to demonstrate the idea of how useless he *seems* to be towards others, towards society.

That does not mean, however, that he is not relevant to the story. On the contrary, his role is essential in many ways. Leah, for instance, used to be in love with Nathan when she was a teenager, allowing us to confirm her introspective side since he never knew about. Moreover, Natalie meets him after going out of her home trying to clear her head of her husband's discovery of her secret online affairs. Nathan is also an element of linkage in the plot, as he is potentially related to the crime of killing Felix.

Of course he certainly does not know any of these things; what he thinks is that he is not worth the effort. In fact, Nathan himself is constantly denouncing his failure, as when he states: "I'm looking at myself asking myself Nathan why you still here? Why you still here? And I don't even know why. I ain't even joking. I should just run from myself." (Smith, 2012, p. 312).

Therefore, if we consider Han's idea of the *society of achievement*, he is the utter representation of the opposite of what is the ideal modern lifestyle. For not achieving his goals, for not being productive, he feels guilty and inferior – he did not reach his own (nor the society's) expectations. Accordingly, the conclusion is that no one is free from this sort of model in which we need to be always and steadily pressuring ourselves to be better and better. Since he does not evolve, he suffers and, as a result, he wants to *run from himself*.

On the other hand, there is also another angle to this aspect, which is the fact that, to a certain extent, "many of us are not able to choose how we want to live." (Marcus, 2013, p. 72). In other words, people have different opportunities in life and this is often decisive to establish whether one is going to be successful or not. One of these elements is certainly the social position. The underprivileged are always and inevitably, one way or another, going to be at a social disadvantage. The only relief is that we are all going to stop this running at some point when life ends.

Indisputably, Nathan is in the most miserable reality. But he does not die in the story and this prompts us to think that being alive is not the only thing that matters; it is more important to live well.

Although Felix dies, he has lived a better life in comparison to Nathan's. He knew better how to enjoy his *time*. In this sense, the novel brings this notion of how fleeting and fragile life is. In modern times, Smith addresses the fact that we may sometimes feel that nothing matters and that people are just people, some of them we know, some we don't.

In a city like London, one could look at hundreds of different faces, all connected in a way, but also disconnected in the sense that they do not actually have any bond. With that said, Lauren Elkin (2015, p. 2) highlights the modern frivolity stating that "Leah, Natalie, Felix, and Nathan's lives intersect like the lines on the map of the Underground; like commuters, they pass each other in the street and only dimly register each other's presence."

In the liquid modern life of acceleration, constant mobility, and superficial relations, "it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but 'for a moment'". (Bauman, 2000, p. 2). This is, in fact, a constant idea throughout the novel: that it is important to be aware of the passage of time. The bright side is that this consciousness is exactly what prompts us to make the best out of this finite period.

CONCLUSION

White Teeth and *NW* are indeed two novels that, in different ways, show many elements from Bauman's *Liquid Modernity*. In fact, Zadie Smith's literature portrays modern life in many layers and indisputably, some of these are directly related to discussions from contemporary Sociology. Moreover, her stories are political but also psychological, building a great balance between what is fundamentally human and what is historically social.

Her first book is about family and tradition, but also (and perhaps even more importantly) about the inevitable challenges of disrupting and reframing old traditions and dogmas. The search for a new life model is characteristic of a liquid life: a reality of constant attempts of change and dynamism. As a consequence, the story also depicts the difficulties of building one's identity, a term that is, for many scholars, in a period of crisis. Bauman and others highlight the difficulties of understanding who we are in a world of so many options, and this is certainly addressed in characters such as Millat Iqbal, Clara Bowden Jones, Joshua Chalfen, and others.

The idea of creating a chart with characters of predominantly solid or liquid features was a natural consequence of finding such striking associations with the analyses presented in Bauman's modernity. In this sense, *White Teeth* portrays the difficulties between different cultures, but also between different generations. *Time* is a vital theme in Smith's novels as it is in Bauman's studies. Similarly, we observe the overt relation of her book with, for example, Stuart Hall's observations on identity or Raymond William's considerations on community.

Accordingly, the novel underlines the modern notion of *territory*, that is to say, a notion that takes into consideration that the physical place where we are is not always so decisive when it comes to social interaction. With this statement, we are not implying that there is not any difference between one place and another. What we are highlighting here is that the cultural barriers among different nation-states do not operate in the same manner as they used to before globalization. In this sense, the characters from different countries and different cultures live experiences that would not be possible in other times before modern industrialization.

NW's relation with *Liquid Modernity* is different. As we have pointed out, the novel is about what it is like to live in a poor and cosmopolitan area of London, but also addressing the inner issues and peculiarities of the characters *as individuals*, prompting us to remember that no one is the same. Hence Leah's famous sentence "I'm the sole author of the dictionary that defines me." (Smith, 2012, p. 3).

Therefore, while *White Teeth* often displays the search for identity in a process of identification with others, *NW* underscores the challenges of identifying with their own selves. In this sense, the latter acquaints us with the character's inner issues with a more psychological approach. Leah is compassionate and introspective whereas Keisha/Natalie is focused and practical. Felix has a good heart and many dreams and Nathan is charming and mysterious. All these peculiarities then, display the complexity of a cosmopolitan geography that is built through all these diversified minds, all these individuals.

The novel underlines that the ways in which money, capitalism, and consumerism operate in different levels of society do not only affect their purchasing power but also their thoughts, their visions of reality, or even, to some extent, their personality. Their professional paths and interactions with the community are also related to their social class. In this sense, after the solid *Fordism* of big companies wanting to be fixed on the ground, we are faced with liquid models which are more dynamic; that is to say, people change their jobs, money is not only physical but virtual, and companies are developing worldwide in unimaginable scales.

In this sense, *NW* also highlights Byung-Chul Han's idea that we are now our own bosses, constantly pressuring ourselves to be more and more productive, as it is clear, for instance, in Natalie's path. On the other hand, we observe that as Bauman pointed out, the increase of devices that feed our individualism is resulting in a re-signification of community. At the same time, the novel brings us hope to this matter; a positive scenario of what it is to be part of a group and to maintain the human components of empathy, care, and the desire to evolve, despite modern adversities.

Zadie Smith's postcolonial and desegregated novels depict this sense of territorial breaking but at the same time the local specificities of small places. With great skill and precision, her writings prove how social matters can be presented in contemporary literature, denouncing that one way or another, we are all living ''the art of 'labyrinthine living''. (Bauman, 2000, p. 153). In this sense, her work is social, personal, psychological, and modern. The relation between time and space, the tragicomedy of life, and the urban post-industrial reality are all diversely present and blended. *White Teeth* is ambitious and chaotic; *NW* is vertiginous and complex. Both are liquid.

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