Islam’s White Teeth

Priscilla Ringrose
priscilla.ringrose@hf.ntnu.no

Zadie Smith (2000)
White Teeth
London: Penguin

How is fundamentalist Islam perceived in popular culture? With wry humour, Zadie Smith’s bestselling novel, White Teeth, tackles the rise and reception of new forms of radical Islam. But her novel also enters into dialogue with scholarly interpretations of this contemporary phenomenon, creating some unexpected connections with the works of Giles Kepel and Olivier Roy. This article addresses the portrayal of contemporary radical Islam in Smith’s White Teeth, winner of a series of literary prizes, including the Commonwealth Writers’ First Book Prize.1

Smith was born in London in 1975 – to a Jamaican mother and an English father. White Teeth is a rumbustious epic novel which follows the fortunes of three «immigrant» families over three generations throughout the long 20th century – the British and Jamaican Joneses, the Jewish Catholic Chalfens and the Bangladeshi Iqbals. The passages examined are set in multicultural London, from the mid-80’s to the turn of the century, and relate to Smith’s portrayal of one of the novel’s protagonists, Millat Iqbal, son of Bangladeshi immigrants and a con-
vert to a radical Islamic movement. I argue that this novel brings into play two different scholarly interpretations of the origins of contemporary radical Western Islam. The first is Oliver Roy’s sociologically-motivated account of Islamic neo-fundamentalism as a global phenomenon, as expounded in his book *Globalized Islam* (2004). The second, elaborated by Gilles Kepel in *The War for Muslim Minds* (2004), is as historically-grounded understanding of contemporary radical Islam, which traces its origins to the interweaving of different strands of Islamic thought in Saudi Arabia.

Compared to a scholarly analysis, a novelistic approach, such as Smith’s, to the phenomenon of radical Islam has its limits, especially when we are dealing with an idiosyncratic and uproariously funny novel. On the other hand, the novelistic genre has textual capacities which are beyond the bounds of scholarly analysis. In looking at the novel’s contribution to the debate on the form and functions of contemporary radical Islam, I will examine two of these capacities: first, the novel’s ability to manipulate the discourse of its protagonists for its own purposes, and second, its ability to «enter» the consciousness of the other – in both cases I will refer to Mikhail Bakhtin’s elaboration of «double-voiced discourse» (1984: 199). Smith «uses» the discourse of fundamentalism against itself as part of a parodic project, which, I argue, serves to highlight the very ironies of Islam’s contemporary reinvention to which Olivier Roy alludes – namely, its unwitting complicity both with the mechanics of secularism and with the post-modern cult of the self. However, Smith also parodies the cocktail of esotericism and radicalism which we find in Gilles Kepel’s Saudi-centered account of fundamentalism. Finally, I argue, that by entering the consciousness of a fictional neo-fundamentalist, Smith allows us to draw a final dividing line between Roy and Kepel.

For Olivier Roy, neo-fundamentalism is a contemporary form of Islam which is growing amongst second and third generation migrants in the West. Roy distinguishes neo-fundamentalism from political Islam in that neo-fundamentalism is disconnected from the territorially-grounded aims of *nationalist* politics and from the ties of *ethnic* affiliation. For Roy (2005), this Islam is essentially a diasporic phenomenon, and is more a product of contemporary globalization than of the Islamic past: «Using two international languages (English and Arabic), travelling easily by air, studying, training and working in many differ-
ent countries, communicating through the Internet and cellular phones, they think of themselves as «Muslims» and not as citizens of a specific country». What Roy’s scholarly analysis and Smith’s parody of neofundamentalism have in common is that they both interpret this new form of global Islam as a reaction to sociological transformations rather than as evidence of the permanence of unchanging Islamic values.

Smith’s fundamentalist, Millat, is an ultra-cool teenager, with to-die-for good looks and street cred. But, as Smith tells us, this has not stopped him being «fucked up» in the playground despite «his tight jeans and his white rock» (Smith 2001:232). In Roy’s terms, Millat represents a classic potential recruit for neofundamentalism – a socially marginalised second generation migrant looking for a reactive identity «beyond the lost cultures of their parents and beyond the thwarted expectations of a better life in the West» (Roy 2004:13). This is how Millat himself puts it: «He knew that he, Millat was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people’s jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives […] that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered» (Smith 2001:234).

In 1990, at the age of 17, Millat meets an old friend, the newly converted Hifan, who entreats him to sign up to the radical Islamic movement he has recently joined. In examining their dialogue, I will look at the functions of «double-voiced discourse» defined by Bakhtin (1984:189) as «discourse with an orientation towards another’s discourse,» where «the author … make[s] use of someone else’s discourse for his own purposes, by inserting a new semantic dimension into a discourse, which already has, and which retains an intention of its own…. In one discourse, two semantic intentions appear, two voices». These two voices may, as they do here, work against each other, in which case we have the vari-directional form of double-voiced discourse, where «the speaking voice occupying another’s discourse deliberately misbehaves with the intended semantic direction of that discourse» (Aczel 1991:7). In other words, Smith «sabotages» the discourse of her neofundamentalist protagonists by the use of irony.

In the passage below, two types of discourse are parodied – both the self-important, piously posturing discourse of the Islamic neo-funda-
mentalism and the expletive-ridden, street cool speak of urban youth culture. Smith uses ironic juxtaposition of these two parodic discourses to comic effect, emptying out the «subject» of the conversation – Hifan’s account of his conversion and his proselytising of Millat – of any serious value. Instead, the foibles of fundamentalism are mercilessly exposed – its arrogant posturing, its self-important authoritarianism, its magnetic attraction to complicity theories, its inflated anti-Western rhetoric but, also as, I will show, its unwitting complicity with the values it loves to hate (variation in fonts my emphasis, for thematic differentiation):

«Look at the suit … **Gangster stylee!** Millat ran a finger down Hifan’s lapel, and Hifan, against his better instinct, beamed with pleasure. ‘Seriously, Hifan, **man, you look wicked. Crisp.**’

‘Yeah?’

‘Better than that stuff you used to go around in back when we used to hang, eh? Back in them Kilburn days. ‘Member when we went to Bradford and – ’

Hifan remembered himself. Reassumed his previous face of pious determination. ‘I am afraid I don’t remember the Kilburn days, brother. I did things in ignorance then. That was a different person.’

‘Yeah,’ said Millat sheepishly. ‘Course.’

Millat gave Hifan a joshing punch on the shoulder, in response to which Hifan stood still as a gate post.

‘So: there’s a **fucking spiritual war going on – that’s fucking crazy!** About time – we need to make our mark in this bloody country. What was the name again, of your lot?’

‘I am from the Kilburn branch of the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation,’ said Hifan proudly.

Irie inhaled ‘**Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation,**’ repeated Millat impressed.

‘That’s a wicked name. **It’s got a wicked kung-fu kick-arse sound to it.**’

Irie frowned ‘**KEVIN?**’

‘We are aware,’ said Hifan solemnly, […] ‘that we have an acronym problem.’

‘Just a bit.’

‘But the name is Allah’s and it cannot be changed … but to continue with what I was saying: Millat my friend, you could be head of the Cricklewood branch – ’

‘**Mill.**’
‘You could have what I have, instead of this terrible confusion you are in, instead of this reliance on a drug specifically imported by governments to subdue the black and Asian community, to lessen our powers.’ (294–96)

«That was a different person.» Hifan’s religion is, in true neofundamentalist mode, a «born again religion», a religion divorced from his parents’ cultural legacy, a symptom of the growing disassociation of faith and pristine cultures. If this moment represents Millat’s seduction by Islam, his invitation to be «born-again», then the attraction of this new Islam is first mediated not by reference to Koranic exegesis but by the signifiers of gangster cool – Millat, we are told, is a die-hard fan of the Goodfellas, Martin Scorsese’s gangster movie, set in the predominantly Italian New York City neighborhood of Brooklyn, and an icon of American popular culture. Millat’s infatuation with Western popular culture is, ironically, the prism through which he interprets both the verbal and non-verbal elements of Hifan’s Islamic message. Smith plays on the ambiguities of Hifan’s vestimentary code, on the plural connotative meanings of the form (the formal male suit), which here has two different but overlapping signifieds. For Millat the suit evokes the machismo and authority of the Hollywood Mafioso; for Hifan it conjures the machismo and authority of the religious ascetic, whereas, as Anne Hollander’s historical account of the genesis of the suit informs us, its origins lie in the European upper classes of the latter part of the seventeenth century (Hollander 1994:63–67).

Smith’s associative connection between «born-again» religion and a particular vestimentary item can be understood in terms of neofundamentalism’s need to invent itself. Since it is a form of Islam which, as Roy tells us, is not founded on tradition but is being reconstructed in the West, «it has to borrow the different elements it uses to rebuild the body and the daily life of a true Muslim, either from an imagined tradition (for example, the turban or the Pakistani salwar and kameez, whose origin had more to do with the Roman camisa) or from Western sources (raincoat and gloves for women)» – and here we could add the suit for men. It is in this sense, Roy (2004:272) tells us, «that neofundamentalism accords with the modern makeshift cultural patchwork where ‘the social life of things’ depends only on the meaning bestowed on them by consumers/actors».

Hifan and the movement he stands for are comically deflated not
only by the deliberately ludicrous acronym and Hifan’s poker-faced lack of humour, but also by his facile naturalisation of his choice of the name KEVIN by reference to «Allah» and by the ironic contrast between the suburban localism of Kilburn and the extensive ambitions of the imagined eternal and victorious *universal* nation to which he belongs. Roy argues that neo-fundamentalism is part of a global trend where «religiosity (self-formulation and self expression of a personal faith) is gaining the upper hand over «religion (a coherent corpus of beliefs and dogmas collectively managed by a body of legitimate holders of knowledge)» (Roy 2004:5f). Consequently, the self and hence the individual, are central to contemporary religiosity (ibid:28). The collusion of Millat’s macho Islam with his *private* fantasy of the posturing Hollywood-movie gangster points to Roy’s insight into the way neo-fundamentalism becomes an individualistic project, which recalls the general Western trend of the individualisation of religion, and which, as such, colludes with the post-modern cult of the self.

Roy points to a second irony – that fundamentalism is leading to increased secularisation – *not in the sense that «it is under the scrutiny of modern sciences, but to the extent that it is debated outside any specific institutions and corporations»* (qtd. in Mamdani). Religion is no longer meted out through established institutions, but experienced by an inward-looking local community of believers (Roy 2004:28). Anyone, as Smith implies, even the barely converted Millat can become an authority – here, he is immediately offered the headship of a laughably localised community of believers – the sub-suburban Cricklewood branch of KEVIN. Moreover, Hifan’s appeal to Millat to join up is based on his duty to oppose the machinations of Western governments, rather than to adhere to any specific creed. For Roy, the anti-Western mantra of neofundamentalism, framed in anti-imperialistic rhetoric, reveals neofundamentalism hidden parentage, it’s neglected connections to the kind of violence (guerrilla warfare, suicide attacks) perpetrated by leftist and Third Worldlist guerrilla and movements in the 60’s and 70’s (Roy 2004:41–55). Roy underlines this point by stressing the fact that the most dramatic target of neofundamentalists was a symbol of neo-imperialist rather than religious power (Al-Qaeda attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon – not Saint Peter’s Basilica). For Roy jihad is arguably «closer to Marx than to the Koran» (ibid:41).

Smith’s portrayal of the *founder* of KEVIN, Brother Ibrahim ad-Din
Shukrallah, appears to depart from Roy’s transversal account of neo-fundamentalism which situates its origins in the spaces of social exclusion in Europe, and instead points to Gilles Kepel’s historically-motivated account of the intellectual roots of radical fundamentalism, elaborated in *The War for Muslim Minds*. This is because Smith locates Shakrullah’s radicalisation in Saudi Arabia, putting this Kingdom, as Kepel does, «in the eye of the storm». Kepel (2004:152) explains radical Islam as the product of a linear historical tradition. But, as Mahmood Mamdami notes, rather than viewing contemporary Islamic radicals either as «the direct descendent of an esoteric Saudi Wahhabism or of pre-moderns with access to contemporary technology», Kepel paints a complex picture of them as «hybrid products of multiple intellectual traditions» (Mamdani 2005). For Kepel, contemporary Islamic fundamentalism emerges from the shifting and complex triangulated relations between the traditional dogma of the ultra-strict and quietist Salafis of Saudi Arabia; the politicised radical thinking of the Muslim Brotherhood which sought to radicalise it in the 1970’s, and – third, the political interests of the governing Saudi elite with its US «protectors». The trajectory of Smith’s protagonist, Shakrullah, engages with all three points in this triangle.

Brother Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah is a Caribbean convert – he is born Clyde Benjamin in Barbados in 1960 to «two poverty-stricken dipsomaniacs», and converts to Islam after a vision at the age of fourteen (Smith 2001:469). Later, Shukrullah spent five years studying Islam in Saudi Arabia where he «became disillusioned with much of the Islamic clerical establishment, and first expressed his contempt for what he called ‘religious secularists’, those foolish ulama who attempt to separate politics from religion. It was his belief that many radical modern political movements were relevant to Islam» (idem). Because of his views, Shakrullah’s finds himself to be persona non grata, and, after several death threats, moves to England in 1984.

Shakrullah’s trajectory evokes elements of Kepel’s account of the birth and destiny of the *sahwa* movement in Saudi Arabia. *Sahwa* or «the religious awakening» emerged in the mid-1980s, as a result of the influence of the politicised Qutbist-inspired thinking of the Moslem Brothers on the ultra-strict Saudi form of salafism, traditionally controlled by the Saudi Grand Ulema. Starting in the mid-50’s, the waves of Egyptians and Syrian Moslem Brothers who arrived in Saudi had an
increasing impact on Saudi society. Although these incomers were initially forbidden to proselytise by the ruling elite, this decision was reversed in 1979, after extreme neo-salafis not aligned with the Muslim Brothers attacked the Grand Mosque. The Saudi dynasty, suspicious of these attackers’ links to the Grand Ulema, turned to the sahwa for political support (Kepel 2004:179). At this time, the sahwa also provided the Saudi royals with a much-needed «modern» counter-rhetoric to the revolutionary Islamic discourse of Iran, whose polemic against «the Saudi lackeys of the US» was becoming increasingly threatening (idem). The sahwa, on the other hand, took Saudi support for the Afghan jihad as grounds enough for legitimacy. This accommodation between the ruling elite and the sahwa abruptly came to an end when King Fahd requested the help of a US-led coalition after the 1990 Kuwait invasion. The sahwa publically dissented and, as a result, themselves became the target of repressive measures, while the Grand Ulema were brought back into the fold in return for legitimising Saudi military policies (ibid:181).

Turning back to the novel, elements of Shakrullah’s story converge with Kepel’s historical account: namely, the salafi-style pedantry (as we will see) of his Islamic scholarship, the radicalisation of his faith in Saudi Arabia, and finally his condemnation of the traditional ulema’s compromises with the ruling dynasty.4 Once in England, Shakrullah camped out in his aunt’s Birmingham garage for another full five years, during which time «[h]e took his food in through the cat-flap, deposited his shit and piss in a Coronation biscuit tin and passed it back out the same way, and did a thorough routine of press-ups and sit-ups to prevent muscular atrophy» (Smith 2001:469). Shakrullah withdraws into a world of pedantic and painstaking legalism, gleaning «637 separate rules and laws from them Qur’an, listing them in order of severity and then in subgroups according to their nature, ie. Regarding Cleanliness and Specific Genital and Oral Hygiene» (ibid: 470). Smith, here in Kepel-mode, figures Shakrullah as a true heir of Abdul Wahhab, the father of Saudi salafism, who, from his power base in central Arabia in the mid-18th century, «counselling the strictest possible application of the sharia in the most minuscule aspects of daily life and the use of coercion on subjects who did not conform to dogma» (Kepel 2004:158).

However, as Shakrullah emerges from the garage to found KEVIN,
he appears to create a hybrid «monster of modernity» to borrow Mam-
dani's phrase, closer to Roy's syncretic transversal global neo-funda-
mentalism – «by definition an Islam oblivious to its own history» – than
to Kepel's jihadist salafism: «[KEVIN] was a group that took freely
from Garveyism, the American Civil Rights Movement and the thought
of Elijah Muhammed, but remained within the letter of the Quran…. KEVIN: an extremist group dedicated to direct, often violent action, a
splinter group frowned on by the rest of the Islamic community; popu-
lar with the sixteen to twenty-five age group, feared and ridiculed
in the press» (Smith 2001:470).

Whatever their target, irony and ridicule both have an aggregative
function, that is to say that they have the capacity to create «in-
groups». Erving Goffman describes the phenomenon as «collusive
communication» where there are «those in on it [who] constitute a col-
usive net and those whom the net operates against, the excolluded»
(quoted in Hutcheon 1994:55). Irony has been theorized as «creating»
in-groups, but it can also be understood as presuming the pre-existence
of a «like-minded» in-group. From this perspective, the condition for
irony functioning would be the pre-existence of what Hutcheon dubs a
«discursive community» with «shared knowledge, beliefs, values and
communicative strategies» (ibid:91). In this novelistic context, the dis-
cursive community refers to «us readers» whose particular shared
understanding of Islamic fundamentalism enables us to «get» Smith’s
ironical allusions to the «impurity» of this new «pure Islam.» The
exclusiveness implied by the concept of an in-group may presume a
simple power relation or equation, namely one of superiority over the
ridiculed object. But some irony theorists, such as Kenneth Burke,
believe that an author’s relation to the object of irony may not be so
simple. Irony, usually associated with a polemic edge may, on the con-
trary, be «based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy,
as one needs him, is indebted to him, is not merely outside him as an
observer but contains him within, being consubstantial with him»
(quoted in ibid:54f).

In the last excerpt from the novel, where Smith enters into the con-
sciousness of the protagonist, I argue that Smith’s detached irony,
which enables Millat to be «ex-colluded», is mitigated by instances of
empathy, distinguished by the use of the unidirectional form of double-
voiced discourse which «an intention on the part of the author to make
use of someone else’s discourse in the direction of its [that is, that discourse’s] own particular aspirations” (Bakhtin 1984:193). On a thematic level, this happens when Smith humanises Millat by accrediting him the everyday emotions of confusion, self-doubt and anger. On a narrative level, this happens when the speaking voice occupying another’s discourse momentarily stops misbehaving with that discourse and makes use of his discourse in the direction of its own semantic intent (in this case, Millat’s). The Millat we see here is confused and angry, but he is also, more significantly, imbued with an awareness of the very contradictions which his new ideology embodies:

It was his most shameful secret that whenever he opened the door – a car door, a car boot, the door of KEVIN’s meeting hall or the door of his own house just now – the opening of GoodFellas ran through his head and he found this sentence rolling around in what he presumed was his subconscious:

As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster.

He even saw it like that, in that font, like on the movie poster. And when he found himself doing it, he tried desperately not to, he tried to fix it, but Millat’s mind was a mess and more often than not he’d end up pushing upon the door, head back, shoulders forward, Liotta style, thinking:

As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a Muslim.

He knew, in a way, this was worse but he just couldn’t help it…. It was all haraam he knew that.

Worst of all was the anger inside him. Not the righteous anger of a man of God, but the seething, violent anger of a gangster a juvenile delinquent, determined to prove himself, determined to beat the rest. And if the game was God, if the game was a fight against the West, against the presumptions of Western science, against his brother or Marcus Chalfen, he was determined to win it…. It pissed him off that these were not pious thoughts. But they were in the right ball park, weren’t they? He had the fundamentals didn’t he? Clean living, praying, fasting, working for the cause, spreading the message? (Smith 2001:446)

The author deliberately «misbehaves» while effecting the incongruous substitution of «Muslim» for «gangster». But when she describes Millat’s own thoughts about the situational irony we, as readers observe, the author’s voice loses its polemic edge: «And when he found himself doing it, he tried desperately not to, he tried to fix it, but Millat’s mind was a mess […] He knew, in a way this was worse but he just couldn’t
here, I suggest, the author and potentially, the reader are «co-
substantial» with Millat not only because we can identify with the
everyday emotions with which he is now associated, but also because
Millat’s thought processes are mimicking ours – he, like us, is becoming
aware of the paradox of his position, which, in Roy’s terms, derives
from his (and our) consciousness of the contamination of contempo-
rary Islam by modernity. Millat’s thought processes break down the
barrier between Islam and modernity, threatening the safe boundaries
of the collusive community, blurring the divisions between colluded
and ex-colluded – his experiences transverses ours, just as his Islam
transverses our modernity.

In conclusion, just as the novel brings two bear two internal voices,
it is also in dialogue with two scholarly voices (Roy and Kepel’s) both
competing for the signified of Western Islam. In assessing the relative
value of these two approaches, Mahmood Mamdani appears to weigh
in on Roy’s side, pointing out that Kepel’s assessment of the state of
Islam in Europe reduces Western Muslim to the status of «conveyor
belts.» Kepel does indeed view Western Muslims either as potential
exporters of modernity to their lands of origin or as importers of religi-
osity to the West (Kepel 2004:249–51). On the other hand, what both
Roy and Smith succeed in doing is to portray Western Muslims not
merely as mediators but as «active subjects struggling to establish a
new citizenship in adverse circumstances» (Mamdani 2005). This is
why Kepel’s version of a Europe overrun by competing versions of
Saudi-imported Islam is not enough to explain Millat. Roy’s account,
by both acknowledging, and transcending the historical roots of con-
temporary radical Islam, accounts for both the Millats and the Shakrul-
lahas of this world.

Note
1 White Teeth also won the Whitbread First Novel Award 2000, the Guardian
First Book Award, the Betty Trask Award and the James Tait Black Memorial
Prize for Fiction. In 2002 the story of White Teeth was made into a short TV
series for Channel 4.
2 Although Millat is one of the main characters in the novel, his story represents
one of many other interweaving narrative strands.
3 My emphasis.
4 Although Shakrullah’s departure from Saudi Arabia in 1984 coincides with the
sahwa’s ascendency, rather than its repression, there are precedents for the expulsions of these radicals, even at this time, if their criticism of the Saudi Royals became too explicit see Kepel (2004:176–77) on the case of Surur.

5 My emphasis.

6 The classic example cited here is Flaubert’s «relation» with his fictional protagonist Madame Bovary (Hutcheon 1994:55).

7 My emphasis.

Bibliography


