

## REPRESENTING THIRD SPACES, FLUID IDENTITIES AND CONTESTED SPACES IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH LITERATURE

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Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* are contemporary novels by recognised women writers in the British literary panorama who, even though born in England, are linked to ethnic groups from South Asia and the Caribbean. Accordingly, these novels have been studied in relation to postcolonial writing and tradition. Yet, I shall argue that they address issues that go beyond the logic of post-colonialism, question categories such as *insiders* and *outsiders* and offer a contesting view of Britain. I shall put forward that these novels depict the plurality of ways in which ethnically diverse people live, narrate and make sense of their multicultural experiences. By so doing, they problematise a homogenous view of British identity, they celebrate the 'third space' and they provide a dynamic representation of contemporary British society. In such a setting, identities are presented as fluid and space(s) as continuously negotiated.

Keywords: *Small Island*; *Brick Lane*; *White Teeth*; belonging; hybridity; third space

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### REPRESENTANDO TERCEROS-ESPACIOS E IDENTIDADES FLUIDAS EN LA LITERATURA BRITÁNICA CONTEMPORÁNEA

*Small Island* de Andrea Levy, *Brick Lane* de Monica Ali y *White Teeth* de Zadie Smith son reconocidas novelas de escritoras británicas contemporáneas que, aunque nacidas en Inglaterra, tienen vínculos familiares con grupos étnicos del subcontinente asiático y del Caribe. Por ello, se han estudiado estas novelas en relación a la literatura y tradición postcolonial. Sin embargo, las novelas tratan temas que van más allá de la lógica postcolonial, ponen en entredicho categorías como "insiders" y "outsiders" y ofrecen una visión alternativa de Gran Bretaña. Argumentaré que estas novelas representan la pluralidad de formas en las que las personas de origen étnico diverso viven, narran y entienden sus experiencias multiculturales. Así, las novelas problematizan la identidad Británica en términos homogéneos, celebran el "Tercer-Espacio" y aportan una representación dinámica de la sociedad Británica actual.

Palabras clave: *Small Island*; *Brick Lane*; *White Teeth*; pertenencia; hibridismo; Tercer-Espacio

## 1. Introduction

Following some of the theses put forward by Kadija Sesay (2005), it can be argued that Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) have to be considered as situated in the continuum from the post-colonial literary production of first-generation immigrant writers in Britain to second-generation integration and inclusion in the British literary canon. Some of the topics that the novels raise are related to those of the early works by Black and Asian postcolonial authors, such as feelings of displacement, elements of racial and ethnic discrimination or questions of belonging and exclusion. Nevertheless, even so, I argue that the problematics that Monica Ali, Andrea Levy and Zadie Smith address goes beyond the logic of post-colonialism and at first sight questions categories such as *insiders* and *outsiders*. The literary production of Ali, Levy and Smith differ from that of postcolonial tradition in the sense that their positions as British-born writers situate them at the core of British society and its literary production. Yet, it is my contention that their novels provide a different, contesting view of this space of the centre. One of the main characteristics that differentiates these novels from the works of early Black and Asian authors is the fact that their writings, I suggest, rather than asserting a space of their own in a society they are also entitled to, attempt to (re)define that space as a hybrid location that is an inherent part of British contemporary society.<sup>1</sup>

This space is problematic; it is characterised by ambivalence and an ongoing process of juggling notions of *belonging* and *exclusion*; it is the outcome of processes of negotiation and change. I consider these novels, in this light, as a depiction of the plurality and the diversity of the ways in which ethnically diverse people live, narrate and make sense of their multicultural way of life. By so doing, I propose that the authors of these novels contribute to creating cultural representations that challenge the view of a homogeneous British society. Levy's *Small Island*, Ali's *Brick Lane* and Smith's *White Teeth* problematise contemporary British social space and reveal varied ways of dealing with being a first- or second-generation immigrant in Great Britain. At the same time they present a diversity of ways of inscribing such experiences in space. Characters in the novels under analysis are, therefore, heterogeneous and diverse and they approach their ethnically diverse origins (in the case of second-generation characters) or the diverse society they inhabit (in the case of first-generation ones) as part of their ordinary daily life. In this respect, the spaces where these characters are located are depicted as being in a continuous process of (trans)formation and change and their identities are represented as being fluid.

There are, nevertheless, evident differences in the ways these three novels engage with a representation of ethnically diverse people in Britain and the spaces where they interact. Primarily, as I shall later comment on in greater depth, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* focuses strongly on second-generation characters and the strategies they develop

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in order to negotiate their identity status and portray their daily lives in a plural location. There is a high degree of optimism in the way Smith approaches ethnic relations in such a setting. Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, however, due to chronological constraints does not depict second-generation but first-generation characters that are forced by historical circumstances to inhabit a location that is changing from mainly mono-ethnic to multiethnic. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* depicts, in turn, a (multi)community-based organisation of society where both first- and second-generation characters, linked initially to a monolithic community, show dissimilar levels of integration in it. The three novels, nonetheless, represent first- and second-generation immigrants in Britain as "those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 1990: 235). In this respect, their identities and the spaces they inhabit are not fixed and homogenous but heterogeneous and malleable.

## 2. The third scenario

The in-between situation of 'belonging' and 'non-belonging' in which ethnically diverse writers find themselves has not only marked their novels thematically, but has also affected the critical categorisation of their work.<sup>2</sup> Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* were well received by critics and readers alike as part of the contemporary British literary canon. Accordingly, these novels were awarded prestigious literary prizes in the United Kingdom. However, these novelists come from diverse ethnic backgrounds and, by that fact, their work has also been considered by some as contributing to "Black British Literature" (Sesay 2005), whereas by others it has been included in anthologies of "British Literature" in general (English 2006; Acheson and Ross 2005). Even when considered as part of British literature, they are still categorised by ethnicity. In this respect, the works of Ali and Smith have been discussed in chapters or essays under headings that point to the ethnic specificity of their authors and the novel's plot, or have been studied in the light of colonial and post-colonial relations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Smith's *White Teeth* and Levy's *Small Island* obtained the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2001 and 2005, respectively; Zadie Smith also won the Whitbread First Novel Award, the Guardian First Book Award and two EMMAS; and Ali's *Brick Lane* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in the year of its publication. Ali was also included in the Granta list of novelists. Likewise, certain recent contemporary British anthologies and critical works on contemporary British literature have devoted chapters to these writers and the discussion of their novels (English 2006; Sesay 2005; Acheson and Ross 2005; Nasta 2004)

<sup>3</sup> Thus, the works of Ali and Smith are included in a chapter entitled 'New Ethnicities, the Novel and the Burdens of Representation' (English 2006) while Smith's work has been analysed under the heading 'Postcolonialism and other -isms' (Acheson and Ross 2005). Moreover, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize awarded to Levy's and Smith's novels is directly related to the ethnic origins of the authors.

This ambivalence behind the categorisation of Ali's, Smith's and Levy's work reveals, in my opinion, a certain reluctance to consider them as British writers and a tendency to label their work as being closer to that of post-colonial authors for 'conveniently' thematic reasons. The former, at the same time, obscures the need to accept their work as providing a contested, more realistic and much needed take on the plural aspect of British society. Moreover, the fact that Levy's *Small Island* focuses on the effects that migration from ex-colonial territories had on the British white population or the indifference with which Smith's *White Teeth* approaches racial issues and questions of ethnic diversity must be read as political statements; they reinforce the view that social difference(s) derived from, or associated with, British past history of imperialism and postcolonialism are the shared legacy of all British citizens, rather than a specific concern of those who are 'non-white'. In this sense, the novels strengthen a view of Britain as inherently hybrid and, as Sesay argues, authors like these "consider the 'hybridity' of themselves and their situation in a way that does not refer to their 'alienness' and even a different kind of 'otherness' than their 'post-colonial' writer peers" (Sesay 2005: 16).

Debates surrounding this issue of categorisation or labelling become even more problematic when authors reject a consideration of their work in terms of a specific literature. Levy alone among these three authors unreservedly accepts the definition and classification of her work as being *Black British*. She openly acknowledges the fact that she writes about the experiences of part of the British population that has been silenced (Allardice 2005; Greer 2004). In an interview with María Helena Lima, Levy stated her motivations for writing as being driven by an eagerness to unearth the silenced history of Black immigrants in Britain: "for me [Levy] the starting point of writing books has always been about wanting to make the unseen visible, wanting to show the experience of [my] parents' generation and the children that came after, having to live in this country, quite a hostile environment, and how [they] cope with that" (Lima 2005: 57). Ali and Smith, by contrast, reject being cast as primarily Asian or Black British novelists. They denounce the burden of representation borne by Black and Asian authors. In this respect, Ali defends the argument that her novel should simply be analysed as a literary product in itself, without considering any further cultural reference. Moreover, Ali refuses to accept that her writing of *Brick Lane* derived from any position as representative of a community: "I wrote out of character" (Ali 2007), she states during a conversation with Hanif Kureishi in London, after the preview of the film adaptation of *Brick Lane*. When asked about the question of representation Ali went on to declare that:

There is a sort of tyranny of representation. James Baldwin's phrase is still in force and the irony is that, you know, fiction succeeds to the extent that it is particular, not representative and nobody would dream of it working any other way if it weren't at [sic] a minority group. So, it's, it's, it's, [sic] I don't know, it's kind of depressing and I think it's related to the growth of identity politics. (Ali 2007)

Smith holds a similar view to that of Ali with regard to the latter. She "defended herself against the tendency of reviewers to locate her novel in a Black literary tradition, which she felt reduced her to the role of spokesperson on issues of race and ethnicity"

(Procter 2006: 102) and advocated for too optimistic a depiction of multicultural relations in her novel; a view that goes hand in hand with her notion of *White Teeth* as a space of enjoyment of her mixed-identity (Merrit 2000). Even so, it cannot be denied that the acceptance and recognition of the work of Levy, Ali and Smith in contemporary British literature is, in great part, the outcome of the past struggles for publication that postcolonial and second-generation authors underwent: “although Zadie Smith took the publishing world by storm on both sides of the Atlantic, few in Britain will not forget [sic] that this was built on several years of writing by Black British women, years of building and developing to enable writers of her generation to emerge and move directly into the mainstream” (Sesay 2005: 17).

Such varied positions on the part of ethnically diverse women writers demonstrate the larger debate that is taking place in contemporary British literature, a debate that is derived from those raised by Cultural Studies in the 1980s over the question of representation. Kobena Mercer (1990) in this respect problematises the status as spokesperson that the Black writer is given in Britain. This has not only affected Black writers but also calls into question the white writer’s legitimacy to create a non-white persona in their literary works. Novelist Maggie Gee, an “indigenous white writer” (Nasta 2004: 5), addressed questions of migration and cross-culturalism in her novels *The White Family* (2002) and *My Cleaner* (2005). Gee has commented on the question of authenticity that is directly related to the politics of representation. Gee argues how there seems to be a questioning in contemporary British literature of the right of an author to adopt identity stances beyond her own identity and location (Gee 2008). The dichotomy ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ undoubtedly underlies concerns over authenticity and determines notions such as belonging and exclusion. Such notions have been at the core of the discrepancies in the classification of the work of ethnically diverse authors and the appropriateness of considering their works as part of the British literary canon, i.e. British national literature, as part of a Black British tradition (especially emphasised during the 1980s), or as belonging to diasporic, transnational paradigms (McLeod 2002; Stein 2004). Moreover, campaigns for cultural authenticity have not only conditioned the categorisation of authors in relation to their ethnic origins but have also marked a tendency to portray British society in opposite terms: i.e. white-British versus non-white British.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It has historically been problematic to define an ethnically diverse identity within a national British identity that has long been described in terms of a hegemonic white English ethnicity. It is worth considering, in this respect, the political use of the term *black* in the 1980s as an umbrella term to refer to people of darker skin colour in Britain coming from Africa and the Caribbean and, at times also people coming from the Asian subcontinent. The term *Black* conveyed a collective, unitary identity strong enough to resist negative stereotypes embedded in the collective imaginary: “politically, this is the moment when the term ‘black’ was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalisation in Britain that came to provide the organising category of a new politics of resistance” (Hall 1988: 266). It was a constructed category that was politically useful at the time for it was a needed step for ethnic minority groups in the process of forming their own identities. During this phase Black artists asserted their rights to create their own representations, to contest the marginalised positions where Blacks were placed and to question the stereotypical nature of images of Blacks. This early

The incorporation of the works of ethnically diverse authors into mainstream British literature has been a crucial step in the process of re-defining *Britishness*. As Sarah Lawson Welsh already stated in 1997: “the growing visibility of their own creative and experiential mappings of nation, of the complex state of (un)belonging in Britain, has been central to the problematizing and unsettling of received versions of Britishness as well as in undermining notions of a fixed, unchanging construction of nation” (Welsh 1997: 52). In this respect, the critical acclaim received by Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Andrea Levy's *Small Island* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* testifies to the prominence of what Hall calls 'the literature of the third scenario' (Bastida 2009:150). I consider Ali's, Levy's and Smith's work as being directly connected to the position they occupy at the 'centre' and inevitably influenced by the literature produced from this perspective: British literature. However, I understand the novels under analysis as literary productions that offer a multilayered sense of belonging, rather than a homogenous and unique one. The novels do not belong exclusively to either British or Black- and Asian-British literature; they are both and none at the same time. They are examples of British literature, even if of a hybrid sort. The ambivalent position in which these British-born, ethnically diverse authors are located is, thus, the product of the interaction of two literary traditions, yet the outcome is a multilayered British text. In this sense, I agree with Trace Walters' description of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* as the epitome of the fusion of Black and British Literature; as a hybrid literature that “reform[s] both literatures and prov[es] the two to be mutually exclusive.... [It creates] a new Black/British text, a story ... that includes the experiences of characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds, whose racial differences actually account for the commonality of their shared experiences and their Britishness” (Walters 2005: 321).

### 3. Contested spaces

The three novels under analysis are contextualised in the multicultural city of London. Ali's, Smith's and Levy's characters problematise at different levels and in different ways the space they inhabit and the relations they establish in that space: with their parents (*White Teeth*), with their peers (*Brick Lane*), with the nation in which they are located (*Small Island*). In this sense, space, following feminist geographer Doreen Massey's ideas (1994, 2005), is understood as a geographical location as well as a set of social relations. This view of space is productive in the study of the literary representation of the multiplicity of heterogeneous spaces that are found in contemporary multicultural societies. The spatial dimension is an important factor in a multicultural society because spaces in such a setting are in an ongoing process of negotiation and change. Through that process, new spaces emerge that reflect plurality and “the simultaneous coexistence of others with their own trajectories and their own stories to tell” (Massey

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stage was followed – not necessarily as a substitution, rather in the sense of a continuum – by the emergence of theoretical debates surrounding the definition of *Black identity* that pointed towards the need to reject a unitary vision of Black identity and acknowledge difference: i.e. African-British, Caribbean-British, Bangladeshi-British, Pakistani-British, etc.

2005: 11). This idea highlights the fluid nature of space and is central to a spatial reading of Ali's, Levy's and Smith's novels. As I argue, all the novels depict a series of characters interacting within spaces that are permanently contested. Hybridity is found both in the diverse ethnic origin of the characters the novels portray and in the representations of the spatial loci in which the characters interact. The novels celebrate the 'third space' by presenting a dynamic representation of space in contemporary British society. In Levy's *Small Island*, Ali's *Brick Lane* and Smith's *White Teeth*, space and identity are malleable categories that are presented as in constant processes of re/vision, re/definition and change. The three novels, however, emphasize different historical moments, dissimilar configurations of space and different community groups that inhabit the city of London.

Levy's *Small Island* is set against the backdrop of the years following the Second World War. Levy concentrates on the lives of two couples, one white, British-born (Queenie and Bernard), the other Black, Jamaican-born (Hortense and Gilbert), thus creating a duality in the narrative. The novel recounts the particular story of these two couples but at the same time the events in which they are involved can be extrapolated to account for the general experiences of both British citizens and Black British subjects. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was a considerable migration of Black populations who, having collaborated in the war effort or having been brought up under the auspices of British colonial education, decided to come and stay in the United Kingdom. The idea underlying the logic of the new-comers was that of coming to the 'Mother Country'; a country that was waiting for them; a country portrayed in the colonial imaginary as a place of opportunities; a country immigrants from the British ex-colonies were eager to defend: "They need men like my son. Men of courage and good breeding. There is to be a war over there. The Mother Country is calling men like my son to be heroes whose families will be proud of them" (Levy 2004: 59); a country they thought they were entitled to reside in.

*Small Island* shows, however, a description of a mother country that is not welcoming to immigrants during the first stages of the interaction between white and Black populations. One example of the negative attitude towards immigrants is expressed in the opinions of Mr Todd, Queenie's neighbour, who states: "Darkies! I'd taken in darkies next door to him ... His concern, he said, was that they would turn the area into a jungle" (Levy 2004: 113). For both Hortense and Gilbert, as they are socially constructed as the 'Other', the idea of the Mother Country shatters. The female image of the country is therefore described in negative terms as the novel develops. It becomes exactly the opposite of what the metaphor of the 'Mother Country' suggested. It is not young and sensual, but old and abject, and she does not provide protection for her children. It is a bad, uncaring and selfish mother. It might perfectly fit the description of any witch in western fairy-tale imagery:

Let me ask you to imagine this. Living far from you is a beloved relation whom you have never met. Yet this relation is so dear a kin she is known as Mother. ... Then one day you hear Mother calling. Leave home, leave family, leave love ... The filthy tramp that eventually greets you is she... Can this be that fabled relation you heard so much of? This twisted-crooked weary woman. This stinking cantankerous hag. She offers you no comfort after the journey. No smile. No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, 'Who the bloody hell are you?' (Levy 2004: 139)

In *Small Island* there is a stress on questions of racial discrimination and notions of belonging and exclusion that is not to be found in such detail in Ali's *Brick Lane* or Smith's *White Teeth*. This thematic emphasis on immigrant life positions Levy's novel closer to the postcolonial tradition of story-telling and resembles early works by first-generation Caribbean migrants such as Sam Selvon's novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). *Small Island* focuses on the consequences of the Empire by acknowledging its repercussions both for the migrant and native population. *Small Island* reiterates the fact that all members of British society are forced to make adjustments and redefine their sense of belonging and this is an issue that was not explored in depth in early Black British texts. In relation to the latter, Levy's novel portrays a crucial moment in British history and marks the beginning of present-day multicultural British society. This is a moment of social disruption and change. The horrors of the war, poverty, famine, racism, discrimination and dehumanisation are the problems all the characters have to cope with in one way or another.

In this new situation, all the characters are forced to renegotiate their sense of identity and space. Hortense and Gilbert have to (re)imagine the notion of the mother country and (re)negotiate a new reality after migration; Queenie has to go through the war on her own and is forced by social circumstances to give away her Black baby; Bernard is obliged to dismantle his whole system of beliefs and accept the presence of Black citizens in London. These highly intense moments mark a turning point in the lives of the characters. As Queenie movingly describes:

There are some words that once spoken will split the world in two. There would be the life before you breathed them and then the altered life after they'd been said. They take a long time to find, words like that. They make you hesitate. Choose with care. Hold on to them unspoken for as long as you can just so your world will stay intact. (Levy 2004: 491)

These are not simply words but a new social order that affects the characters to the extent that they all feel displaced in the social space they inhabit. Levy's novel gives no answer to this displacement. The novel is open-ended, since the topics it deals with are still in the process of being configured, as are social relations among different ethnic groups in present-day Britain.

Ali's *Brick Lane* questions the degree to which the adjustments put forward in Levy's novel came about 50 years later, illustrating as it does community life and racial relations in the area of London from which the novel takes its title. In this case, the non-white ethnic group depicted is not Black but Asian. The novel focuses on the Bangladeshi population that began migrating to Britain in considerable numbers in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Brick Lane* concentrates on community life and highlights different degrees of cohesion and fragmentation within the Bangladeshi



community inhabiting the area of Brick Lane. The narrative evolves around Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who migrates to London after an arranged marriage. Nazneen's contact with British society is non-existent during the first decade of her life in London. Nazneen is bound to her husband, by her lack of competences to socialise in the new environment and her inability to speak English. Her space is limited to the apartment where she lives and the Bangladeshi community that surrounds her.

Ali's depiction of a part of the Bangladeshi population inhabiting Brick Lane proves the inadequacy of homogenising communities according to their race or their ethnicity; at the same time it shows the different ethnic groups living in the centre of London. As Iris Marion Young pointed out, nowadays space can no longer be equated with a single and homogenised community, at the same time that the idea of community cannot be associated with a single or homogenous identity:

One of the problems here has been a persistent identification of place with 'community'. Yet this is a misidentification. On the one hand, communities can exist without being in the same place – from networks of friends with like interests, to major religious, ethnic or political communities. On the other hand, the instances of places housing single 'communities' in the sense of coherent social groups are probably – and, I would argue, have for long been – quite rare. Moreover, even where they do exist this in no way implies a single sense of place. For people occupy different positions within any community. (Young 1990: 153)

There are two main ways in which community heterogeneity is addressed throughout the novel. One of them is Chanu's reflections on the Asian population of Brick Lane. Chanu criticises the existence of a homogenised view of all Asians in the British collective imaginary. This issue is questioned every time he tries to draw a line between himself and the illiterate members of the community. He considers himself to be an educated man and, therefore, insists on establishing connections with well-off educated members of the Asian community such as Dr. Azad. He establishes internal divisions within the Asian population living in Brick Lane based on education and by so doing shows that the assumption of homogeneous communities within the same space is quite unreasonable:

'I am forty years old', said Chanu. He spoke quietly like the doctor, with none of his assurance. 'I have been in this country for sixteen years. Nearly half my life'... I had ambitions. Big dreams ... And then I found things were a bit different. These people here didn't know the difference between me, who stepped of an aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads. (Ali 2003: 34)

The other means by which homogeneity is deconstructed is the fact that the novel presents the reader with a community in which there are not only external conflicts – as the creation of the radical Islamic group shows – but also many intra-community problems in terms of first- and second-generation relations. These differences are explicit in the novel's depiction of characters that show different levels of assimilation and interaction with the host society.

In the case of first generation characters, the degree of contact with non-Bangladeshi people and the networks of social relations they establish follow a gender pattern. Men create relations with other people outside their community and women are presented as socialising only within their family network since they are dependant on the will of their husbands. Second generation characters such as Nazneen's teenage daughters Shahana and Bibi or Razia's children Tariq and Shefali present different levels of assimilation to British culture. Their identity struggles are different from the struggles of their parents. They are not trying to fit into a culture but rather to find their own space by drawing on the culture they have been brought up in and, to some extent, either appropriating or rejecting the culture of their parents. Conflicts between first- and second-generation immigrants characterise the novel. This issue is addressed in the family conflicts that arise between Nazneen's teenager daughters, Shahana and Bibi, and their father, Chanu. Shahana and Bibi are quite well integrated in British society. Their identity is constructed according to British cultural norms; they have no sense of belonging to Bangladesh. Chanu forces his daughters to maintain a link with his native culture. Yet, this link seems meaningless to the girls, who are unable to relate to a place and a culture they have never known. In a manner that resembles colonial teaching practices, Chanu insists on his daughters' learning Bengali and reciting Tagore: "Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. She hated her Kazmeez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them" (Ali 2003: 180). Chanu is frustrated by his daughters' rejection of what he thinks must be their cultural roots.

*Small Island* and *Brick Lane* portray how social policies dealing with ethnic diversity in Britain are still being negotiated. There is no unique, right or definite movement and, as some social critics have pointed out, the policies addressing the social integration of migrants in the United Kingdom are complex and could be said to have followed a pendulum movement; from assimilation to integration, from integration to multiculturalism and, after the attacks of 11 September 2001, back to assimilation again: "we have seen more of a critical stance towards multiculturalism and at least a partial return to an assimilationist perspective, particularly in the context of the 'war on terror' and outbreaks of urban unrest" (Cheong *et al.* 2007: 26). *Brick Lane* fictionalises some of the consequences that the attacks of 11 September 2001 had on ethnic relations in Britain and the 'urban unrest' that followed them. After the attacks, feelings of non-belonging, racist attitudes towards Muslims and tension between a part of the white British population and the Muslim population generated both external conflicts and internal debates in the Muslim community. These events particularly affect second-generation characters such as Karim and the other members of the group The Bengal Tigers. These characters were born in London, therefore this is the only social environment they know; yet, they are viewed as outsiders.

*Brick Lane*, in this respect, depicts different ethnic groups living in the centre of London but not necessarily interacting with each other in positive ways; Ali's novel points towards the existence of a "virtual conviviality" between ethnically diverse groups (Gilroy 2004). The novel is critical of too optimistic a view of multicultural relations and depicts space as a contested location hosting different communities. This view contributes to acknowledging the existence of other identities in British society

and yet, at the same time, it problematises multiculturalism by reflecting how a naïve perception of multiculturalism can lead to a false impression of equality and homogeneity that overlooks power relations.

The last novel under analysis in this paper, *White Teeth*, also draws upon the changes in social space in terms of the evolution of a multiethnic society. However, its take on multiculturalism and its treatment of the question of racial differences and the relations established between different racial groups in the city of London are different again from those of the other two novelists. Smith describes immigration and its consequences with a certain optimism; the ethnically diverse characters portrayed in *White Teeth* relate to each other in an often funny, sometimes shocking and naïve way. Smith's intention is to present a multicultural Britain where ethnic differences are deemed insignificant. Smith's narrative covers a long period of time in British contemporary history: from the aftermath of the Second World War until the year 1999. During these years, Britain underwent crucial social changes that affected and were reflected in the organisation of social spaces. In this respect, the time frame of *Small Island*, *Brick Lane* and *White Teeth* coincide. Nevertheless, by contrast to the first two novels, *White Teeth* does not make explicit reference to the difficulties that arise with the presence of the new-comers in both the immigrant and native communities. Elements of racial discrimination are present in the text but are veiled with humour and irony. Smith chooses not to write a novel that denounces the drudgeries endured by Blacks and Asians at the onset of a multicultural British society, but one that attempts to celebrate the outcome of such events: "this has been the century of the great immigrant experiment" (Smith 2000: 326). In this sense, social spaces of interaction are depicted in *White Teeth* as offering people the opportunity of constant self redefinition as the direct result of a society that, due to its multicultural nature, is in itself continuously open to adjustments.

Non-arbitrarily, the novel opens with the failed suicide attempt of Archie Jones, a white-British subject. Such an event signifies a rebirth opportunity that, paradoxically, is given to him by the (un)timely presence of Mo Hussein-Ishmael, an Asian Muslim immigrant who owns a halal butcher's shop. This represents a social reality – the acknowledgement of the existence of 'the other' – that would have been unheard of in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: "once in the street, Mo advanced upon Archie's car, pulled out the towels that were sealing the gap in the driver's window, and pushed it down five inches with brute, bullish force: 'Do you hear that, mister? We're not licensed for suicides around here. This place is halal. Kosher, understand? If you're to going to die round here, my friend, I'm afraid you've got to be thoroughly bled first'" (Smith 2000: 7). The tone in which the whole episode is narrated marks the tone of the novel. Archie's personal life becomes a parallel example of the changes undergone by British society after the Second World War. During his fighting in the war he encounters 'the other' for the first time and establishes a long-lasting friendship with Samad Iqbal. From a position of fixed identity in which there is no scope for the acceptance of 'the other', both characters learn to negotiate a space of interaction that develops into a relation of mutual respect. O'Connell's Pool House is "Archie's and Samad's home from home; for ten years they have come here between six (the time

Archie finishes work) and eight (the time Samad starts) to discuss everything from the meaning of Revelation to the prices of plumbers” (Smith 2000: 184).

The relations between them strengthen during the late 1970s and the 1980s. During this period of time immigrants are consolidated presences in British society, a society that is facing major economic changes. Both Archie and Samad marry and establish a family life that is a reflection of the social policies of the New Right and its advocating of conservative strategies, such as reassertion of the importance of the family (Smith 1994). *White Teeth*, at this point, concentrates on how a multiethnic society affected and was reflected in the space of the family. The irony behind Smith’s portrayal of the reassertion of the family as the cornerstone of British society lies behind the fact that this family notion ceases to be stable and white by ‘norm’, but encompasses a variety of ways of forming and being a family. The insertion in the novel of a triad of families: the Chalfens, the Iqbals and the Joneses marks a change from the duality that was present in the previous two novels analysed and symbolises a break with the notion of the good “normal family” – nuclear, middle-class, white family – versus the “faulty”, “deteriorated” other kinds of family – lone-parent, un-educated parent, disadvantaged families. The Chalfen family, white, educated and upper-middle class, is initially presented as the proper family, whereas Irie’s and Millat’s working class, un-educated and mixed-race parental households are deemed as malfunctioning. As the novel evolves these stereotypes are called into question. None of the three families can be regarded simplistically in dualistic terms of good and bad or normal and deviant. The narrative at this point focuses on the teenage problems of the three families’ offspring. Irie Jones, Millat and Magid Iqbal and Marcus Chalfen defy expectations based on social origin. All of them, regardless of the (in)stability of their households, are displaced and trying to find their own spaces within their families and within society.

#### 4. Asserting Hybridity

Andrea Levy’s *Small Island*, Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* address issues of ethnic diversity in the city of London in different and particular ways, yet with some commonalities. As I have stated at the beginning of this essay, these three novels contribute to a sense of British identity as being heterogeneous, diverse and in an ongoing process of redefinition and, what is more, they depict such identity as ordinary. By so doing, they validate alternative ways of being British. I argue that Levy’s *Small Island*, Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Smith’s *White Teeth* depict first-generation and second-generation characters that are examples of British diasporic identities. Levy’s, Ali’s and Smith’s novels not only depict characters who have suffered a direct diasporic experience related to British colonial history – Nazneen in *Brick Lane*, Hortense and Gilbert in *Small Island*, Samad in *White Teeth* – but also others that are subjected to a more subtle displacement. The notion of diaspora reverberates the image of a journey that is normally materialised in a real displacement but can also be associated with a cultural and psychic one (Brah 1996). First-generation characters in the novels under analysis suffer an undeniable diasporic experience: they undergo physical dislocation when they leave their countries of origin to come to Britain. Second-generation

characters may not have undertaken a diasporic journey, but – due to the fact that they inhabit a border space, a hybrid space, a third space (Bhabha 1990) – they are also located in a ‘diaspora space’ which can be defined as “multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries” (Brah 1996: 194).

This also affects the white British population that is forced by new social circumstances to meet Black and Asian immigrants for the first time in their national territory. Feelings of spatial dislocation, dis/encounters with their most immediate community or their family and the need to negotiate a different sense of identity within their own spatial location permeate these three novels and are common to all the characters to different degrees. Moreover, these ethnically diverse characters are compelled to find their own spaces in a geographical and national frame that for long was constructed only in ‘white’ terms. In this sense, the British-born Shahana, Bibi, Irie, Millat and Magid are forced to re-define their identity status within an imaginary community (Anderson 1983) that, in many cases, fails to provide positive referents for them. In such conditions, some of them need to turn their gaze to other geographical locations and other cultures in order to ‘root’ themselves in contemporary British society. Irie and Millat and Magid (*White Teeth*) look back to Jamaica and Bangladesh, respectively. These thematic traits have resulted in the novels’ association with postcolonial and second-generation writings, since problems of displacement, boundary negotiation and root-searching have been recurrent subjects in the literary productions of migrants and second-generation immigrants (Weedon 2008).

Nevertheless, my contention is that these novels are examples of British literature that differ from the postcolonial tradition in that they normalise the experiences of ethnically diverse people and, in so doing, contribute to a hybrid view of British society. Levy’s, Ali’s and Smith’s novels advocate for a multilayered British identity that draws on different cultural and national identities at the same time. The identity search undergone by the characters presented in *Small Island*, *Brick Lane* and *White Teeth* and the social spaces they are made to inhabit are characterised by hybridity and negotiation. The fluid identities and the contested spaces presented in these novels are the result of an enriching process of hybridisation. Hybridity is in this sense defined as something productive, as a means of questioning culture as a stable entity that confers a homogeneous identity (Bhabha 1994). As Carolina Fernández Rodríguez has pointed out, the use of the term *hybridity*, or the phrase *cultural hybridity*, has created debates in the field of Cultural Studies. Other theorists such as J. O. Ifekwunigwe, as Fernández Rodríguez argues, have rejected these phrases in favour of *cultural métissage* to account for the experiences of “individuals who ... embody two or more world views or, in genealogical terms, descent groups” (Fernández Rodríguez 2003: 67). Nonetheless, as Fernández Rodríguez also argues, the term hybridity has been very convenient as “a destabilizing concept that constantly forces us to question all preconceived notions, such as, for example, those of ‘cultural purity’ and ‘unified national identities’” (Fernández Rodríguez 2003: 68). As a result, the characters in the novels are located in a strategic position that allows for redefinition and change. This possibility of change that hybridity offers entails a notion of cultures that, in the same way as the concepts of identity and space, are defined as malleable and not static. Cultures “are fluid and temporary social constructions, made and remade over time” (McDowell and Sharp

1997: 210) and they are in a process of formation that involves “the remapping of cultural identities and practices for *all* those involved” (McDowell and Sharp 1997: 210; emphasis in the original).

Homi Bhabha (1999: 37-38) has clearly stated the hybrid aspect of contemporary British society and how this entails a change in the process of cultural articulation that is bringing about cultural transformation, the acceptance of hybridity and the questioning of cultural homogeneity. These changes, following Susheila Nasta, have, however, been very much resisted (Bhabha 1999: 39-43). In this light, the Parekh Report on *The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain* published on 11 October 2000 identified some of the factors that were central in the changing of Britain over the last thirty years and that contributed to the creation of a sense of a more diverse and less homogeneous British society. The report pinpointed the need to redefine “current norms of Britishness” and denounced how “a sense of national identity is based on generalisations and involves a selective and simplified account of a complex history. Much that is ignored, disavowed or simply forgotten” (Parekh 2000: 16, quoted in Weedon 2004: 30).

The novels under analysis in this essay portray British society as a hybrid location where traditional conceptions of what constitutes a national identity are continuously challenged by the heterogeneity that is to be found in the myriad of characters depicted in the novels. Therefore, it can be argued that the conception of space portrayed in Levy’s *Small Island*, Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Smith’s *White Teeth* is larger than the geographical territory of Great Britain. The novels, though mainly set in London, either devote a part of the narrative to depict first-generation characters that migrate to Britain from ex-colonial territories – Jamaica in *Small Island*, Bangladesh in *Brick Lane* – or show characters forced to imaginarily cross continents in an attempt to trace their roots back and negotiate their present identity status in Britain (such is the case of Irie and Millat in *White Teeth*). Therefore, following John McLeod, it could be stated that the vision of British society that these five novels address “occupies a space between ‘massive floating continents’, looking both within and beyond national borders to a transnational consciousness of how the world turns” (McLeod 2002: 56). The spatial locations where the characters re-negotiate a sense of identity range from the society where they were born (as in the case of Queenie and Bernard during post-Second World War years) to the community where they migrate (as in Nazneen’s case and Hortense’s and Gilbert’s) or the family in which they live (as in the case of Shahana, Bibi, Irie, Marcus, Millat and Magid).

In the plural social space depicted in these novels, race and ethnicity are an inherent factor but they are not portrayed as the only major issue. Race and ethnicity come alongside problems of community identity (*Brick Lane*), national identity (*Small Island*) and family identity (*White Teeth*). Levy, Ali and Smith reject critiques of their work that focus on race. They refuse to stress race and ethnicity as their prime signification for difference, dislocation or exclusion in the novels, and this is a political act. It is true that the racial divide between the white and the Black population is central to Levy’s *Small Island* and that Ali’s *Brick Lane* also engages with racial problems between a part of the Muslim and the white communities in London. Nonetheless, the ethnic origins of the characters are not an issue that is highlighted as negative. In the case of second-

generation characters, being from a different ethnic background is not in itself the only problematic matter. There are other crucial aspects that intervene in their processes of identity negotiation. This entails the assertion of hybridity as ordinary and positive rather than as extraordinary and negative.

Zadie Smith's inclusion of three different family households in *White Teeth* is, perhaps, the most evident example. James Procter (2006) mentions Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* as an example of this fact. Procter explains his point by arguing that: "their [these novels'] everyday indifference to difference, perhaps also registers what Paul Gilroy has recently termed 'aspects of Britain's spontaneous convivial culture', the 'ability to live with alterity without becoming anxious, fearful, or violent' (Gilroy 2004: xi). The refusal to worry about 'race' in these novels, or to invest in insurrectionary forms of violence as progressive alternatives, is not necessarily a retreat from politics" (Procter 2006: 119). The attitude that such novels adopt responds, thus, to a moment in British history in which the initial reactions towards alterity – rejection and fear are the most universal ones (consider Levy's *Small Island*) – had been overcome to give way to what James Procter had referred to as "the-taken-for-grantedness of multiculturalism" (2006:119). It is important to bear in mind how a reassertion of multiculturalism can be in itself problematic, for discourses on multiculturalism are homogenising and stereotyping and they imply power relations as well. Moreover, advocating for 'an indifference to difference', for a non-racially-focused construction of characters in the novels involves the risk of excluding them from debates about difference; debates that are crucial in an understanding of these novels as examples of British literature that provide a broader view of British identity.

## 5. Conclusion

Literary works produced by ethnically diverse women writers such as the ones under study, participate in this process of cultural re-definition and by inscribing the history of part of British society that has not been widely dealt with in literature (as is the case of Andrea Levy's account of Caribbean female experiences of immigration and settlement in Britain in *Small Island*) they interrogate official accounts of British history. These novels portray a multicultural space where a homogenous cultural identity is questioned throughout. In Bhabha's terms such literary works show how "culture is less about expressing a pre-given identity (whether the source is national culture or 'ethnic' culture) and more about the activity of negotiating, regulating and authorising competing, often conflicting demands for collective self-representation" (Bhabha 1999: 37-39). These literary works, by presenting a dynamic representation of spaces in British society stress hybridity and, therefore, celebrate the 'third space'. Bhabha's thesis and the deconstructive idea conferred by the term *hybridity* lie precisely behind my contention that the novels under analysis subvert an ethnically homogeneous view of contemporary British culture and society (Bhabha 1990: 211). Levy, Ali and Smith make use of fiction as a way of representing a hybrid reality that for them is not extraordinary or marginal but part of their ordinary life. They are writing about what they know, what they experience and what they feel as ethnically diverse

British citizens, and their novels echo this diversity. Their experience is to be British in a multicultural location where identity is fluid.

Identity and its performative character become an issue once the idea of belonging to a place – that is, the connection between space and self – is broken: “the thought of ‘having an identity’ will not occur to people as long as ‘belonging’ remains their fate” (Bauman 2004: 12). Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman draws attention to the fact that “the problem of identity” is a modern phenomenon in that it is brought about by the disassociation of the concept of birth and nation as a once single cause-effect factor (Bauman 2004: 24). For Bauman we are all living in “liquid modernity” characterised by a lack of stability and radical change. In such a life setting, “identities are perhaps the most common, most acute, most deeply felt and troublesome incarnations of ambivalence” (Bauman 2004: 32). Ethnically diverse authors born in Britain experience this disassociation and this ambivalence even more since they occupy an in-between space where traditional cultural representations of Britain fail to encompass their ‘hybrid’ identity. In some respects, following Bauman’s postulates, their identity status has to be seen as located in a continuum of opposed forces of belonging and exclusion, communitarism and individualism (2004: 77).

Thus, having access to the spaces of representation that literature bestows allows ethnically diverse female writers such as the ones under analysis to deal with the daily experiences of ‘hybrid’ individuals and redefine social spaces that acknowledge their British hybrid identity. The novels exemplify the dynamic and fluid nature of social space by depicting social spaces as constantly being negotiated and, accordingly, inscribed with variable meanings. If “the metaphoric and the real do not belong in separate worlds; [if] the symbolic and the literal are in part constitutive of one another” (Keith and Pile 1993: 23), then, through their literary productions, Levy, Ali and Smith can be said to offer alternative ‘representational spaces’, following Henri Lefebvre’s thesis on *The Production of Space* (2005). Such alternative spaces might, in turn, contribute to modifying social spaces and the social meanings attached to them. For meanings are not immanent but are always constituted and affected by the representational spaces that articulate them. Even if this could be too optimistic a reading, what cannot be denied is that the novels analysed provide, inscribe and validate different ways of being British and different strategies of inhabiting a hybrid location in contemporary Britain.

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