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Melita Glasgow

Don Fletcher

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## Palimpsest and seduction: The glass palace and white teeth

### Abstract

There is much critical commentary on the use of palimpsest as a metaphor in postcolonial writing for the violent imposition of colonial culture and indeed, this emphasis is warranted. Less noted, however, is the element of seduction involved in the concept of hegemonic control in colonial or imperial situations and in postcolonial fiction. The purpose of this article is to illustrate the use of these concepts in the popular and critically acclaimed postcolonial novels, Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). While palimpsest – as metaphor and technique – is evident in both, this essay argues that the idea of seduction plays an important part in the understanding and representation of complex colonial relationships in both novels.

MELITA GLASGOW AND DON FLETCHER

## Palimpsest and Seduction: *The Glass Palace* and *White Teeth*

There is much critical commentary on the use of palimpsest as a metaphor in postcolonial writing for the violent imposition of colonial culture and indeed, this emphasis is warranted. Less noted, however, is the element of seduction involved in the concept of hegemonic control in colonial or imperial situations and in postcolonial fiction. The purpose of this article is to illustrate the use of these concepts in the popular and critically acclaimed postcolonial novels, Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). While palimpsest — as metaphor and technique — is evident in both, this essay argues that the idea of seduction plays an important part in the understanding and representation of complex colonial relationships in both novels.

The term palimpsest refers to the physical erasure or the covering over of one surface with another, and in postcolonial studies it refers to cultural overlay and control of a discourse in addition to military and/or political takeover. The colonial struggle includes the imposition of cultural definitions over the existing interpretations of events. History as palimpsest refers to the writing over of previous histories in order to displace them. In terms of geographic space, colonial discourse covers over prior texts, images, names and meanings of a place, constructing it as empty and ready to receive inscriptions (Carter 23). Thus the palimpsest metaphor highlights the 'active layering of cultural meanings' whereby the forms and meanings of the imposed culture are privileged and prominent, obscuring and contorting the meanings and forms of past cultures (Cowlshaw 294).

The nature of palimpsest has implications for techniques in postcolonial fiction; specifically, for the tactics of the authors as opposed to the tactics of their characters. In James Scott's (non-palimpsestic) analysis, any articulation against colonial imposition can only take place in secret or 'off stage', outside the official discourse, and at least the private maintenance of one's original language is obviously relevant to that possibility. De Certeau, however, details through the metaphor of palimpsest how the oppressed tactically bend and manipulate the strategic rules of the dominant order, forging a place for themselves in the dominant overlay (29–42). Nicholas Thomas discusses this as the degree to which a colonial history may have been shaped by 'indigenous resistance and accommodation' rather than simply the will of the colonisers (15, 56).

Palimpsest then, carries the suggestion of superimposition and residual layering because previous meanings are not totally erased. As Daniel Alarcon

argues, there are always traces of previous inscriptions, and the series of writings, over-writings, and partial erasures of histories and myths result in ‘a tangle of contentious and sometimes contradictory texts’ (7). Culture as palimpsest implies that there remain ineradicable traces of past cultures which form part of the constitution of the present (Ashcroft, et al. 174; Rabasa 145). This means that there can be no pure cultural past to return to, given that each historical layer has been tinged by the cultures that have gone before it. In India, for example, there can be no reaching back to a ‘pure’ Hindu past. More centrally here, it also means that because colonial erasure is only partially successful, the language or ‘counter hegemonic voices’ of the colonised, in Alarcon’s term (189), may seep or bubble through. Chantal Zabus (3) extends the notion of palimpsest to include linguistic hybridisation, or bubbling through, designed to make explicit the alterity of the colonial language, being so ‘other’ that it cannot convey the indigenous culture (173). She talks about the ‘indigenisation’ of the colonial language (3) and heralds ‘the palimpsest as the major icon of cross-cultural syncreticity and linguistic metissage in non-Western literature and criticism’ (10). As one example, the language used by the Algerian novelist, Assia Djebar, creates ‘a multilingual palimpsest’ with traces of oral Arabic inscribed within the French text (Donadey 1). Similarly, Salman Rushdie is famous for his use of words from many languages, of hybrid words, and of the syncopations of Indian English. In addition, of course, Rushdie uses palimpsest as explicit motif and metaphor in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995; see Fletcher 2001).

Palimpsest is a form of hegemony, which Michele Barrett describes as ‘the organisation of consent without violence or coercion’ (238). Yet, palimpsest does involve a type of violence. In Jose Rabasa’s terms, discourse itself is part of the violence of conquest. Alarcon comes close to proclaiming palimpsest the key to all postcolonial study (4), but a theory of the colonial imposition of hegemony that credits so much to palimpsest does not take sufficient account of the role of seduction, or what Peter Pierce describes as ‘captivation by the dominant culture’ (144). As Jane Miller remarked of Edward Said’s theory of cultural hegemony, *Orientalism*, it is ‘an immensely seductive theory about seduction’ (114). If seduced, one does not oppose but actively attempts to conform and participate.

In the history of colonialism, Western modernity has been much more seductive than Western ‘westernism’, as it were. The ‘modern’ refers generally to variations on the themes of progress through reason, and while that has often meant science, technology and economic development, it may also include the administrative and the cultural. As Ashis Nandy argues in the preface to *The Intimate Enemy*, colonialism may also actually reorganise local hierarchies, albeit under the overarching one of white racial superiority (and while this may be attractive to some, it is not necessarily attractive to traditional dominants). The advantage of modernity, especially if the appearance of universality is achieved, is that it presents itself as the latest stage in historical development. It outbids or

supersedes its rivals by appearing to be the latest stage in an inevitable progression. It also may be sufficiently seductive to cause self-hatred among those who 'fail' to be 'modern'.

The argument in this article is that *The Glass Palace* and *White Teeth* focus on palimpsestic and seductive effects of imperialism differently. In *The Glass Palace* palimpsestic effects are primary, but major characters also are seduced by 'modern' aspects of the West. In *White Teeth* the focus is more consistently on the attraction of 'the modern' for major characters. This fundamental difference between the novels is evident at the level of literary construction and device. *The Glass Palace* features the central metaphor of stain to denote palimpsestic effect, and indigenous languages bubble up through the overlay of English. The characters are multi-lingual, and language is used to include some while excluding others. The general effect is one of seriousness. In *White Teeth* the approach is much lighter — an ironic tone or consistent facetiousness is used to deflate the 'modern' pretensions of the characters, while the intermix of languages is used for humorous effect. Language may still bubble up, but it is more a case of people being caught between two languages (and thus the humour) than of indigenous languages pushing against English.

#### THE GLASS PALACE

*The Glass Palace* is an epic exploring three generations of families and their activities across Burma, India and Malaya. The story begins with the colonisation of Burma, proceeds through WWII, and ends during Ne Win's military dictatorship in Myanmar (ex-Burma). The major characters are: the Bengali Rajkumar, his eventual (Burmese) wife Dolly and their sons Dinu and Neel; Dolly's friend and Indian independence activist, Uma Dey, and Uma's twin nephew and niece Arjun and Manju; and Alison, the grand-daughter of Rajkumar's mentor, Saya John. Rajkumar, a dispossessed orphan, grows up and makes his fortune in Burma while Dolly moves as a child to India with the exiled Burmese royal family. Uma, Arjun and Manju's stories take place largely in India. Dinu and Arjun meet Alison on her family's rubber plantation in Malaya.

Ghosh uses the concept of palimpsest to pull this broad story together. In a minor but direct way he invokes palimpsest in Dolly's response to questions about her childhood in Burma. Although memories only come in small bits, she says, they cannot be blocked out — as when scribbling on a wall is only partly successfully painted over (113). More generally, Ghosh uses the analogy of a stain colouring Indian thinking, which is much more aggressive than Rushdie's use of the analogy of intermixing cooking flavours in *Midnight's Children*. Arjun ultimately recognises that the mentality of Empire affects Indians, and especially Indian troops, controlling their perceptions (518–19): 'It is a huge, indelible stain which has tainted all of us' (518). This means that they also are 'steeped in the racial mythologies' of the British (520), which in turn contributes to the palimpsestic nature of the military structure in India, with the British at the top,

Indian professional soldiers in the middle, and Tamils at the bottom as racially unfit to be soldiers (in the British view and thus in the professional Indian military view).

While this stain analogy fits under the earlier characterisation of hegemony as palimpsest employed in this essay, it also invokes the attraction of the modern. Rajkumar, for example, is impressed that the British bring commerce and efficiency with them (66); more specifically, he notes that only the Europeans thought to use elephants for profit (74). The thought of controlling nature for man's benefit excites him (75). Dinu, on the other hand, is involved in modern photography but does not subscribe to colonialism, using new art forms from magazines as a refuge from the Myanmar dictatorship. Uma, also, after initial enthusiasm, realises that the smaller world created by transport technology does not assure greater international (or domestic) understanding.

Primarily, however, the attraction of the modern is explored in relation to the Indian army. Loyalty to the army is ultimately enforced by coercion, deserters to the new Indian National Army being tried for treason, but soldiers like Arjun are captivated — they want to be 'sahibs', and Arjun knows the Empire has effectively died when it is no longer alive within his own heart (441). He sees the Indian military itself as 'modern', as breaking traditional taboos, fraternising across racial and religious lines, and living with Westerners; he and his colleagues are the 'first modern Indians' (279) to overcome traditional racial and religious hierarchies as well as by participating in modern military technology. This does not work out quite as he envisages. When Indians begin to become officers there is a backlash among the British. Even other Indians are not happy to serve under Indian officers (281–82), and Arjun's commanding officer sees this as 'self-hate' (282), the other side of adulation of the British.

The modern is perceived to be good, in part, because the traditional is perceived to be bad. In Burma the masses were excluded from the royal Palace on pain of death (34), and those admitted to serve could only enter through low doors (32) and always had to crawl in the royal presence (54–55). The queen had killed off potential rivals to her husband (38–39, 115). But Dolly suggests to Uma (then the British Collector's wife and not yet converted to the cause of Indian independence) that Queen Victoria has been responsible for millions of deaths (114), and after the invasion of Burma there are 'round-ups, executions, hangings' (56). Similarly, when Dinu points out that women were badly treated in pre-Empire India, Uma agrees and recognises that tradition-based resistance to colonialism can entrench traditional inequalities, but she also argues that imperialism is not intentionally a reform movement and that women's situation in Burma had clearly deteriorated (294). Old hierarchies are destabilised, and the foreign orphan Rajkumar is able to prosper, but he also becomes part of the exploitation of Burma by Indians under the Empire. The point here then, is that colonialism can be both 'modern' and imperialistic, while tradition-based resistance to imperialism may advantage some indigenies but disadvantage others.

Language is central to these conflicts, and languages are deployed in several ways in this novel. All of the major characters are bi- or multi-lingual with strong cultural ties to more than one country. Indians born in Burma have both Indian and Burmese names and use words from both languages, and even the Burmese princesses, in exile, learn Indian languages. Despite (or because of) the official dominance of English, retaining the old dialect is a way of maintaining old ties, especially for Rajkumar (66, 122). There also are terms peculiar to work situations, for example, from the teak camps (73) and rubber plantations (230), reflecting the high percentage of minorities working in such places (89). Language is overtly used as a weapon as well as to bind people together. The Burmese queen in exile, for example, speaks Hindustani fluently and uses that to embarrass and intimidate Indian officials who are Parsi or Bengali (109). Also politically, Dinu declares the need to communicate in 'secret languages' in Myanmar under military dictatorship (509).

The main characters, like the Indian army, are seduced by different aspects of the modern. Those discussed here are Rajkumar, Uma, Arjun and Dinu, who, respectively, play the roles of entrepreneur, political activist, soldier and aesthete. The novel is generally structured to provide over-layered perspectives.

Rajkumar is a Bengali orphan left to fend for himself in Burma just before the British colonial invasion. Even as a child he is bright and ambitious, marked by 'curiosity, hunger' (30; 58) and is able to take advantage of the opportunities opened up by imperialism. He becomes a labour contractor in order to raise business funds. This position also enables him to acquire inside knowledge with which he can underbid competitors in order to secure a large teak contract that makes him wealthy. Rajkumare turns to war profiteering in an attempt to save his fortune (315–16, 393), arguing that this is just the way things are done. His gamble fails when WWII bombing destroys his last financial ploy, and he ends up a refugee, returning to India penniless — perceived as a failure by his daughter-in-law (469) but taking solace from his grand-daughter. In agreeing with the British that the Indians are necessary to the Burmese economy (241), Rajkumar fails to realise that his economic interests have political implications. He learns early in his career to smile and wait during periods of government repression (46), and is happy to participate in British imperialism rather than opposing it. He states the case for the entrepreneur (248), but he overstates the case for Western initiative, as many characteristics of modernism are not unique to the West.

Uma enters this story as the wife of the Collector (an Indian rare in the upper levels of the Raj administration who is responsible for the protection of the Burmese royal family in exile). After the death of her husband, Uma becomes active in anti-colonial politics, specifically in the Indian Independence League. The brutal suppression of the Burmese rebellion convinces her that Gandhi is right that an armed uprising cannot defeat a modern Empire (254). Thus, her support for non-violent opposition is pragmatic rather than utopian, being based

on her recognition of the technical (military) strength of modern Empire, as is her stance that using English does not undermine her anti-colonial credentials (295). It does mean, however, that once again opposition is couched in the Empire's language.

Arjun, Uma's nephew, is accepted into the new, prestigious Indian Military Academy (257) and thence into the 1st Jat Light Infantry (259). Initially he sees this battalion's role in the Empire positively (262), thinking that India's military is its most modern organisation. His absorption into the Indian military is accompanied by his enthusiastic adoption of English slang (259). However, despite his conventional good looks and charm, Alison (grand-daughter of Rajkumar's mentor) recognises that he is shallow — a view that echoes the 'mercenary' claim made against him and other Indian soldiers. Although captivated by the Empire, Arjun changes his view mid WWII, coming to articulate the view that the Indian army is tainted by the stain of British racism. He dies fighting in the anti-imperial Indian National Army (480), having changed sides, but not having abandoned the military.

Of Rajkumar and Dolly's two sons, Neel takes after Rajkumar in burly appearance and in interests, but Dinu is more delicate like his mother. Childhood polio has left Dinu with a limp and an introverted personality. He is shy except when holding a camera (226). He begins to see everything through the view finder (351) and while in Malaya he relates to Alison, the first love of his life, through photo techniques (356–58). Dinu is on the far left of student politics (306), but he supports the Empire during WWII because he thinks the Nazis and fascists are worse (293). He sees his own personality as overly accommodating, while Alison always fights back (246), and, indeed, she dies shooting at Japanese soldiers. Later, back in Burma, Dinu marries and his wife is active in the democracy movement. They are both jailed, and she dies of TB upon release (501–502). Dinu avoids politics in Myanmar (535) but is seduced into activity by opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi<sup>1</sup> because he perceives her as understanding that politics is ultimately trivial compared to 'religion, art, family' (542). In the face of overt censorship, including artistic censorship, Dinu holds seminars on photography that provide opportunity not only for enjoyment but for the expression of personal opinion (even if the topics are not overtly political) in the face of pressure to obey (509).

Dinu is revealed to be the major character at novel's end, and not simply because he is the last man standing. He is, throughout, the main counterpart to Rajkumar and he is contrasted to Arjun's physicality and gung-ho military style in the competition for Alison. Therefore it is important to consider his role further, especially as he is not directly 'political'. As a form of 'the limping hero', in contrast to the other males Dinu evokes what Ato Quayson calls the 'tropes of disability in post-colonial writing' that reflect the maiming effect of empire. Quayson cites Lacan's discussion of the 'culturally structured set of stereotypes



about wholeness' (56) that is superimposed ('palimpsestically, as it were') over the infant mirror phase and its deluding reflection of wholeness (55). It is the apparently whole and vibrant Rajkumar and Arjun (and Neel) that do not survive.

Dinu's role also involves an artistic and very 'modern' orientation. Photography is perhaps quintessentially modern, to some extent conditioning our way of living and of perceiving reality. There are palimpsestic overtones in the question of whether photos only show the surface layer or tell the truth. Interestingly, Dinu's philosophy of photography is taken from the famous American photographer Edward Weston. Thus, Dinu emphasises the careful setting up of photos (pre-visualisation) just as Weston focused on beautiful composition and technical meticulousness at the expense of social consciousness (Sontag 96, 102, 136, 142). This would appear to parallel Gosh's depiction of Dinu in the novel. Despite some ambiguity in the text, Dinu is not directly involved in 'political' activity and supports Suu Kyi because she recognises the triviality of politics, seeing the space he provides for discussion about photography as significant in itself. He quotes Weston's advice to Trotsky to the effect that exposure to new art forms can itself open people up to new ways of thinking (510). Dinu is attempting to create space outside the political arena based on an alternative, more open form of the modern — even meeting to talk about photography is an escape from the palimpsestic overlay of dictatorial censorship. Nonetheless, like Rajkumar and Arjun, he also is in some sense a 'mimic man' trying to catch up with the West.<sup>2</sup>

Pursuing the seduction theme, Ghosh emphasises the importance of Indian willingness to do the work of Empire for the British. Part of this is informal participation in economic activities within the Empire. Rajkumar, for example, serves as a contractor of Indian labour for Western petroleum companies in Asia (124) and later he owns the largest teak company in Burma as one of the Indians running the Burmese economy (240). Primarily, however, this work is official administration and military activity. The Indian Civil Service acts as an 'imperial cadre' (158) and the (Indian) Collector defends the Empire to the Burmese king (107). Burma generally is under the administration of British India (243). With the Japanese invasion of Malaya during WWII the Indian station master in Malaya accepts a whites only policy on the evacuation train as appropriate, and Indian guards enforce it (423–25).

The other side of formal administration is military. Two thirds of the British colonial force in Burma were Indian Sepoys (26), and they were used later to put down a Burmese rebellion (247). The situation is similar in Singapore (29) and Malaya (327). The Sepoys were often more loyal than lower class British troops, and the Empire was considered secure as long as the Indian troops remained loyal and would put down uprisings (223). Compared to Malaya, all India seems poor (348), by implication because India finances its own military support of the Empire and participation in English campaigns (221).

Gosh suggests that the key to the Indian relationship to Empire is seduction, and that WWII did create a crisis. Without the promise of independence, why should Indians go to war for Britain and very likely be sent overseas (313, 318, 406), while those already overseas were at risk of being overrun by the Japanese (393). This situation was exacerbated by racial tensions caused by discrimination against Asians in (imperial) Asian countries (345–46, 406, 423–25) and by British backlash against the new phenomenon of Indian officers (338–39, 353). Indian officers eventually rebelled (or deserted). Arjun accepts Buckland's prediction that the Indian rebellion will begin in the military, as they are the best educated and are being asked to risk their lives, but Uma has been working for Indian independence since the 1920s (and for Gandhi before that). Arjun is actually among the last to stop being what his fellow Indian officer Hardy calls 'the biggest stooges of all' (427), just as he was initially among the most severely tainted with the stain of seductive imperialism.

#### *WHITE TEETH*

*White Teeth* is set in neo-imperial England and revolves around the friendship between Englishman Archie Jones and Bengali Muslim Samad Iqbal, who served together in the British army during WWII. The novel traces the lives of Archie and Samad, their wives, Clara (Jamaican) and Alsana (Bengali), and their children Irie Jones and the Iqbal twins Magid and Millat. Also featured are Marcus and Joyce Chalfen and their children, who become involved with Irie, Magid and Millat. Palimpsest appears in the form of the stories about Archie and Samad in Belgium during the war and about Samad's great-grandfather Mangal Pande in the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Dorothy Smith argues that public discourse consists of a series of layers, and to understand previous events we must rely on participants retelling those stories as filtered through, and regulated by, higher layers. Thus, on the one hand, the claim that Archie and Samad make on their war experience is bogus, based as it is on Samad's assumption that Archie killed a 'war criminal' scientist in Belgium when he did not (94). On the other hand, Samad repeatedly tells a positive version of Mangal Pande's role in the 1857 Indian Mutiny which is otherwise erased by official history.

The importance of language to the success of 'counter-hegemonic discourse' was noted at the outset of this article, and to this effect, languages are deployed in a number of ways in *White Teeth*, but primarily an interplay of languages is employed for humorous effect, undermining the seriousness of the speaker or the topic. Alsana, for example, is consistently caught between languages (and cultures), using fractured expressions: 'Getting anything out of my husband is like trying to squeeze water out when you're stoned' (67). In defense of arranged marriages, she argues that a relationship worked because 'Eve did not know Adam from Adam' (67). She consistently addresses her niece with the full phrase, 'lesbian niece of shame'. Samad speaks with an 'Anglo-Indian lilt' (93) and

slips into Bengali: ‘so colourfully populated by liars, sister-fuckers, sons and daughters of pigs, people who give their own mother oral pleasure’ (455). In the opposite direction, an inflection betraying twenty years in England undermines his most vehement invective against the West (349).

Clara’s mother Hortense speaks with a Jamaican accent but also has a voice she reserves ‘for pastors and white women’ (34). Clara herself has a Jamaican accent (30), especially when ‘excited or pleased’ (57), but also has ‘a threatening patois’ (451). The unimpressive KEVIN leader, Shukrallah, speaks with Caribbean inflections and undermines his message by tautology and three-word repetitions (‘Don’t be misled, deluded, fooled’ [407]). Irie criticises Millat for putting on a Jamaican accent to mock the Iqbals and Joneses (206), but there is a common street argot (188, 200–201), and all kids use a Jamaican accent to express scorn (145). Thus, when asked by Joyce where he is from originally, Millat responds in his ‘bud-bud-ding-ding accent’ (275). An exception then to the use of language merely for humorous effect, is the aggressive deployment of Jamaican accents and ‘Paki’ terminology — linguistic identifiers that surface in times of stress or emotion. This slipperiness and slippage of language also provides opportunities for irony. For example, in street language ‘chief’ means ‘fool, arse, wanker’ (141), so when the unsuspecting Samad refers positively to Magid as ‘a natural chief’ Millat smirks (187).

Irony is a highly contested term, but usually refers to saying one thing but meaning another. In that sense, it is inherently palimpsestic, consisting of the surface statement, the implied meaning, and the two combined in narrative context. Distinguished by what Nancy Walker calls ‘open ends and contradictions’ (23), irony supplies no answers and is both ambivalent and, according to Linda Hutcheon, subversive — a rhetorical strategy for contesting existing discourses from within. (1991, 1994) Irony may also have the purpose of indicating to one’s discursive community that these people and/or statements are not to be taken too seriously.

It is primarily in this latter sense — as a playfully teasing tone or as the trivialising humour of the facetious — that irony is encountered in *White Teeth*. For example, no one can take the school seriously when ‘detention’ has been replaced by ‘post class aberration consideration period’ (262). Samad worries that modern Western decadence has substituted irony for knowledge (179). The critic James Wood has a similar worry, disparaging *White Teeth* and other ‘postmodern’ fiction for replacing character development with ‘hysterical realism’. Then again, Wood has his own restricted view of the ‘good’ novel, and Smith’s characters are otherwise deployed. Importantly, they are seduced by different aspects of modernism and the solutions they find are undermined by ironic tone among other devices. This may make the text more comic than satirical,<sup>3</sup> but it may also open up the text and help to avoid what Nicholas Thomas calls the grand narratives of postcolonial writing.

Alsana worries that the Chalfens ('Chaffinches') are 'Englishifying' Millat (297), but generally it is the modern rather than the Western that seduces these characters (and it is Irie and Magid, not Millat, who are susceptible to the modern in the form of the Chalfens). It is particularly Irie, Magid, Millat and Samad who are seduced. Irie wants to look like the white girls because Millat sleeps with them and considers her only in the category of an old friend. Further, she sees herself as fat, busty and uncontained, and hates herself for it (230, 232, 235ff). The episode of Irie's attempt to straighten her hair which ends with the purchase of a wig is too painful for facetiousness.

Irie is captivated by the Chalfens and wants to exchange the 'randomness' of her own family for the 'science' of theirs (294–95). This 'science' embodies a form of middle class rationalism that believes children should speak out and openly accepts psychological analysis of action and response (275, 277). But Irie is wrong about the Chalfens. Smith undercuts their middle-class claim to inheritance of The Enlightenment with the coda, but 'where they got this idea, its hard to say' (372). They are in fact a parody of themselves with their 'Chalfenisms', their ignorance about Islam (276, 301–302) and their lack of understanding of lesbianism or other people generally (301–302). In addition, the apparent excellence of their inter-generational communication is undermined by their son Josh's joining the militant animal rights group FATE without his parents' knowledge.

It is clear however that Magid is seduced by science. He was captivated by a chemistry set at the age of ten (145) and later by his school science experiments (181). Like Irie, he is attracted to eliminating the random (315) and so is attracted to Marcus as a Chalfen and to Marcus' cloning project. But his seduction by science is also undermined by Smith's facetiousness. He becomes a clone himself, in his mother's view: because he brushes his teeth six times a day and irons his underwear — it is like having David Niven at the breakfast table (362–63). In only four months his correspondence with Marcus approached 'the length and quantity of the true epistophiles, St Paul, Clarissa, Disgruntled from Tunbridge Wells' (314). Magid identifies Marcus immediately at the airport, but when Marcus takes that as a further sign of a mystical meeting of minds Magid points out that Marcus is the only white person at that gate (362). This desire by Magid and Irie to escape randomness is negatively linked to Marcus' (and Nazi) eugenics against the positive value of hybridity.

Millat seems different from Irie and Magid and is not seduced by the Chalfens, but he too is attracted to the modernity of the West. Feeling he belongs nowhere and needs to belong (233), he does not know who he is (245) and suffers from self-hate (322). The reader is prevented from seeing Millat as behaviourally similar to Joyce through Smith's use of ironic tone taken in relation to Joyce's stereotypical sexual desire for Millat. Millat however is not treated without humour, joining the Islamic organisation KEVIN not only because of the feeling of belonging it affords him but for the outfit and bow tie (378). He can follow

instructions from KEVIN but he cannot give up 'the West' (that is, gangster films). The name KEVIN itself is an example of ironic tone. It stands for Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation, which gives them an acknowledged 'acronym problem' (255). KEVIN is further trivialised when a meeting degenerates from a discussion that centres on the form of violence revenge should take to a discussion of which translation of the Koran should be read (428–29). This is not the Islam of Millat's father (or of his great-great-grandfather). Fundamental Islam is itself a response to modernisation and presumably a response to living in the West, just as Samad is more concerned with his religion because he is living in the West.

Samad, refusing to accept that the second generation need be different (250), is appalled at the children's apparent assimilation (165) and accuses Alsana of having 'swallowed it [England] whole' (173). He simply wants two good Muslim sons (349), and of course sees KEVIN as a terrorist organisation rather than as an Islamic one. Although Alsana articulates the (palimpsestic) argument that there is no racial or religious purity to have lost (204), for Samad it has all gone wrong: 'No doubt they will both marry white women called Sheila' (349), he laments. It does not help that Samad has not been able to integrate economically, unlike Rajkumar in *The Glass Palace*, and is dependent on a distant cousin for a job waiting tables. Finally, however, Samad's response is conditioned by guilt. He is captivated and seduced by Poppy, his sons' music teacher. He is tempted not only by Poppy's flattering perception of him as the embodiment of Eastern wisdom, as Joyce experiences Millat as stereotypically sexy, but also by Poppy as the liberated modern woman. He recognises in her the seductive decadence of the West (126) that is also part of its modernity. Dominic Head argues that in *White Teeth* the present generation is sufficiently assimilated to avoid being cripplingly rootless (108), but the seduction of assimilation remains perhaps the major tension in this novel.

In conclusion then, palimpsest has been used to refer to the manner in which colonial/imperial discourse covers over and represses alternative cultural expression and interpretations of events. This is an aggressive concept, including control over language, even when not including physical violence. In the novels discussed here, however, the idea of seduction complements that of palimpsest, especially the seductiveness of the modern in various forms. Whereas in *The Glass Palace* the palimpsestic stain metaphor is complemented by the seduction of main characters by various aspects of the modern, in *White Teeth* the focus is more consistently placed on the seduction of major characters and on the facetious undermining of those processes. By claiming the modern as Western, colonial/imperial discourse leaves no space for the non-Western modern and undermines appeals to experience as a source of wisdom as simply being out of date, so that alternatives seem restricted to appeals to tradition — with its often archaic inequalities — or the modern West.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi is the General Secretary of the National League for Democracy in Burma and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (1991). She is currently detained under house arrest in Burma.
- <sup>2</sup> The term is, of course from Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*. For a recent worthy exploration of this theme see de Kresten's story of 'Obey' Obeyskere in her novel *The Hamilton Case*.
- <sup>3</sup> Squires describes much of the text as 'satirical', but also suggests that the treatment of racism, for example, is more comedic than overtly political, indicating that 'racism is out of date' (38).

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