White Teeth

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ZADIE SMITH

Zadie Smith was born in Willesden, London, the daughter of a Jamaican mother and an English father. Smith studied English literature at King's College, Cambridge, and wrote *White Teeth*, her debut novel, during her final exams at Cambridge. Her other novels include *On Beauty* (2005), *Swing Time* (2016), *Feel Free* (2018), and *NW* (2012), which, like *White Teeth*, is set in Northwest London. In addition to contributing to *The New York Review of Books* and *Harper's Magazine*, Smith has taught writing at Columbia University and New York University. She has received the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Langston Hughes Medal, and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

White Teeth tracks a number of real historical events related to the history of British colonization, including the Indian Rebellion of 1857, which Samad claims his ancestor, Mangal Pande (also a real-life figure), helped to begin. Ambrosia gives birth to Hortense in the 1907 earthquake in Kingston, Jamaica, one of the world's deadliest earthquakes, and Samad and Archie fight in World War II, eventually confronting the Nazi war criminal Archie failed to execute. The novel also considers important events in the political and cultural history of late 20th-century British society, including Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech, which severely criticized immigration to the United Kingdom from former British colonies, and controversy over Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, received by many Muslims as blasphemous: in *White Teeth*, Millat and KEVIN protest Rushdie and the novel, whose publication prompted bombings at bookstores in London.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In 2000, critic James Wood compared *White Teeth*'s "ambitious," sprawling plot and generally optimistic, vital tone to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997), as well as other works by Salman Rushdie and Don DeLillo. Wood termed this genre "hysterical realism," suggesting that Charles Dickens' similarly maximalist novels might be seen as forerunners to Smith, Foster Wallace, Pynchon, and others, noting, "these books share a bonhomous, punning, lively serenity of spirit." Smith's works have also been included in the literary theorist Linda Hutcheon's designation "historiographic metafiction," describing novels that are heavily reliant on historical events and figures, yet simultaneously metafictional—involving narrators who provide commentary on the novel's progress, signaling to its status as fiction. Other novels often included in this category range from Shakespeare's *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (1608) to postmodern works, such as E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *White Teeth*
- **When Written:** 1997
- **Where Written:** Cambridge, England
- **When Published:** 2000
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Postmodernism, Historiographic Metafiction
- **Setting:** North London, Eastern Europe (in flashbacks), Jamaica (in flashbacks)
- **Climax:** Millat attempts to shoot Dr. Perret at the FutureMouse unveiling, and Archie steps in front of the bullet.
- **Antagonist:** Dr. Perret
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Television Adaptation. The British television network Channel 4 broadcast an adaptation of *White Teeth* in 2002, focused mainly on the male characters Archie, Samad, Millat, and Magid.

Publication History. The publication rights for Smith's novel were auctioned off before the novel was completed in 1997—and before Smith had even graduated from Cambridge University.

PLOT SUMMARY

Archie Jones, a middle-aged Englishman, is slumped in a car in Northern London on January 1, 1975, attempting to commit suicide by suffocating in the fumes. His Italian wife, Ophelia, who suffers from an unknown mental illness, has just divorced him after 30 years of marriage. He is inadvertently saved by Mo Hussein-Ishmael, the neighborhood butcher, who insists that his property is not "licensed" for suicides; Archie takes this as a sign of his own redemption. Reenergized, he drives past an "End of the World" New Year's party and decides to stop by. There, he meets Clara Bowden, the 19-year-old daughter of a Jamaican immigrant, the devout Jehovah's Witness Hortense Bowden. Six weeks after meeting, Clara and Archie are

married.

A prolonged flashback explores Clara's childhood and her relationship with Ryan Topps, an unappealing but rebellious boy in her high school. Though Clara is drawn to Ryan for his deviance from the religious tenets she has been taught, Ryan begins to spend more time with Hortense than Clara, and he eventually becomes a Jehovah's Witness. Clara, though, continues to smoke, drink, and attend parties, until she meets Archie in 1975. Clara is disappointed by her marriage, quickly realizing that Archie is a "dull man." Nonetheless, she makes friends with Archie's best friend Samad Iqbal, whom he met when both men served as soldiers in Eastern Europe in World War II, and Samad's wife Alsana. The two families' children grow up together in Willesden, London.

Both Samad and Archie have found low-level employment after their careers in the military: Archie in a paper-folding company, Samad in a West End curry house. The men content themselves with frequent trips to their beloved pub, O'Connell's. Samad, though, is particularly upset with his lifestyle in London, since he believes that he is destined for greater things: he is obsessed with the story of his great-grandfather, Mangal Pande, a Hindu soldier known for firing the first shot of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Alsana, whose marriage to Samad was arranged, is also dissatisfied with her own life, since she is forced to work hard to make ends meet. She befriends Clara, and the two women become pregnant at the same time (Alsana with identical twins).

Through a flashback, Samad and Archie are revealed to have been relatively unimportant soldiers in World War II, part of the "Buggered Battalion," a squad of misfit soldiers stationed in Bulgaria. After the rest of the regiment is accidentally killed, Samad and Archie encounter Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret, or "Dr. Sick," a Nazi collaborator. Samad wants his wartime experiences to measure up to Mangal Pande's (supposedly) courageous actions, and he insists that Archie kill Dr. Sick.

The novel skips forward to 1984. The Bowden and Iqbal children are in primary school, and Samad begins an affair with Poppy Burt-Jones, the school's music teacher. Tormented by his own inability to follow Islam's teachings, Samad decides to send his son Magid to Bangladesh—an attempt to restore his family's connection to their faith and culture. Meanwhile, Millat, Magid's twin, becomes a rebellious womanizer as he grows up, though he eventually devotes himself to KEVIN ("Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation"), a fundamentalist Muslim brotherhood based in London.

Meanwhile, Irie, Clara and Archie's daughter, struggles with her identity and personal development while harboring a secret crush on Millat, with whom she has grown up in Willesden. Irie, Millat, and a classmate, Joshua Chalfen, are caught with marijuana at school, and as punishment, Irie and Millat are forced to attend study sessions at Joshua's home. There, they meet Joshua's middle-class intellectual parents, Joyce and Marcus; Marcus is working on a project called "FutureMouse," manipulating the genes of a test mouse in order to cause cancer progression, effectively eliminating genetic chance. While Joshua grows more distant from his family, ultimately joining an animal rights group called FATE ("Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation"), Millat grows closer to the Chalfens, particularly Joyce, who hopes to save him from his reckless, wanton lifestyle. After expressing a desire to take a year off after high school to visit Africa, Irie gets into an argument with Clara. She leaves for her grandmother's house, where she lives temporarily with Hortense and Ryan Topps, who has become Hortense's live-in aide.

Magid returns from Bangladesh, where he began a correspondence with Marcus Chalfen, helping him to develop and market the FutureMouse project. The mouse is set to be unveiled at the Perret Institute in London on December 31, 1992. Millat, unimpressed by Magid's newfound atheism and intellectualism, refuses to see his brother, and the two become estranged. Irie tries to convince Millat to meet with Magid; later, she and Millat have sex, though Millat is horrified by his own actions, which contradict his fundamentalist beliefs. Almost immediately after, Irie has sex with Magid.

Different threads of narrative converge at the announcement of the FutureMouse project on New Year's Eve, where KEVIN, FATE, Archie, Samad, and Irie gather. Both KEVIN and FATE are protesting the project, though Millat and Joshua are beginning to feel disconnected from their respective causes. Millat brings a gun with him, ostensibly to shoot at the project's directors, and as the event begins, Archie realizes that he recognizes one of these directors, Marcus's mentor: he is Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret, or Dr. Sick. Millat stands up to shoot at the doctor, and Archie blocks the path of the bullet with his own body. The novel then shifts back to World War II: Archie is revealed to have saved Dr. Perret's life, based on a coin flip (and unbeknownst to Samad). Back in the present, Archie is struck in the thigh by Millat's bullet, and the FutureMouse escapes from its cage.

Both Magid and Millat are sentenced to community service, since witnesses are unable to identify the perpetrator of the attempted assassination. Joshua and Irie begin dating, and they raise Irie's daughter together (though the identity of the child's father—either Magid or Millat—is never revealed). O'Connell's pub opens up to women for the first time in 1999, and Clara and Alsana join their husbands there.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Archibald (Archie) Jones – Archibald Jones is introduced as a 47-year-old English World War II veteran who experiences a string of disappointments in his life: his first wife, Ophelia, has a

mental breakdown and leaves him, and he is unable to find better employment than designing folded paper materials for a printing firm. At the beginning of the novel, Archie decides to commit suicide by inhaling exhaust fumes in his car, but he is saved by the intervention of the butcher Mo Hussein-Ishmael. Archie meets Clara Bowden Jones, his second wife, at a New Year's party in 1975, though his life continues to follow an unremarkable trajectory afterward. He prefers to spend most of his time at his favorite bar, O'Connell's, with his best friend Samad Iqbal, whom he fought alongside in World War II, and he adheres strictly to a system of chance, choosing to make decisions by flipping coins. Whereas the non-white or immigrant characters in *White Teeth* feel conflicted about their ethnic and national identities, Archie feels no such anxieties. Though he is plain, simple, and inelegant, he never experiences the kind of discrimination that many of his friends, including the Iqbals, are all too familiar with.

Irie Ambrosia Jones – Irie is the daughter of Archie Jones and Clara Bowden Jones. She is described as an overweight, unconfident teenager who harbors an unrequited crush on Millad Iqbal. Tormented by her own racial identity—she attempts to straighten her hair in an effort to meet white, Western ideals of beauty—Irie is quiet yet intelligent and bold, and she's intent on figuring out her own place in the world. She eventually decides to become a dentist, at the suggestion of Marcus Chalfen, though she is also deeply interested in her own family history and briefly lives with her grandmother, Hortense Bowden. Near the end of the novel, Irie becomes pregnant by either Millat or Magid Iqbal, and she eventually gets into a relationship with Joshua Chalfen, with whom she raises her child.

Clara Bowden-Jones – Clara is the mother of Irie Jones and the wife of Archie Jones, born to Hortense and Darcus Bowden. Like her daughter, she is initially a shy child, forced to go "doorstepping"—recruiting converts for the Jehovah's Witnesses—by her religious mother. Clara breaks away from her life of piety when she meets Ryan Topps, a student at her high school who introduces her to drugs and sex; ironically, Ryan becomes a Jehovah's Witness at Hortense's urging, while Clara continues to rebel. Though Clara considers herself an atheist, throughout the novel she feels insecure about her distance from religion; she still believes that she needs a "savior," someone to redeem her and provide her with purpose. She thinks that Archie Jones, whom she marries at age 19, might play this role, but she quickly realizes that he is dull and unsatisfying as a life partner. Nonetheless, Clara settles into a comfortable family life, though she also seeks out an independent lifestyle—taking courses at a local university and developing a friendship with Alsana Iqbal.

Samad Iqbal – Samad Iqbal is a middle-aged Bangladeshi immigrant who fought in World War II with Archie Jones, who becomes Samad's close friend. After the war, he moves to Archie's neighborhood in London with his new wife, Alsana Iqbal. Samad finds it difficult to adjust to life in England, where he is only able to find employment in an Indian restaurant owned by his cousin. Samad and Alsana eventually become the parents of twin boys, Magid and Millat. Throughout the novel, Samad struggles with his Islamic beliefs, his Bangladeshi heritage, and his role in Western society. On the one hand, he is religious and determined to preserve his ties to Bangladeshi culture, even going so far as to send Magid to Bangladesh as a child in order to protect him from the corruption of Western society. However, Samad is also drawn to certain aspects of Western culture, and he has an affair with his children's white teacher, Poppy Burt-Jones. Samad is also obsessed with the story of his great-grandfather, Mangal Pande, viewing him as a great but underappreciated hero; throughout the novel, he attempts to live up to Pande's legacy, though he does not often succeed.

Millat Iqbal – Millat is one of Alsana and Samad Iqbal's twin boys, and the more troubled of the two—he was born two minutes after his brother Magid. Millat is attractive but rebellious, an avid drug user and charming womanizer. Disenchanted with British society and uncertain about his own place in the world, Millat turns to the radical Islamist group KEVIN, though like Samad, he finds it difficult to give up all of his Western desires and interests (including gangster movies, drugs, and sex). Millat hopes to redeem the legacy of his ancestor Mangal Pande by assassinating Marcus Chalfen, the inventor of the **FutureMouse**. Millat finds the FutureMouse to be unnatural and sacrilegious, an affront to God's power. Yet Millat, like Pande, is unsuccessful in becoming a martyr for his cause. Millat also has sex with Irie toward the end of the novel, and it remains unclear whether he or Magid is the father of the child she eventually bears.

Magid Iqbal – Magid is the older of Alsana and Samad's twins—despite being born only two minutes before his brother, he's more mature, measured, and intellectual than Millat is. Samad sends Magid to Bangladesh as a nine-year-old in order to introduce him to an Eastern upbringing, away from Western vice and corruption. Yet instead of becoming pious, Magid becomes an atheist and a scientist, interested in helping the East to develop like the West. Marcus Chalfen and Magid begin to correspond about Marcus's **FutureMouse** project, and when Magid returns to England as a teenager, the two become colleagues, working on the experiment together. Initially, Millat is put off by his brother's calm, rational demeanor, though the brothers eventually reconcile (after they are both mistaken as the would-be assassins at the FutureMouse press conference). Magid, like Millat, may or may not be the father of Irie Jones's child.

Alsana Iqbal (née Begum) – Alsana Iqbal is Samad's wife and the mother of Millat and Magid Iqbal. She is 20 years old when she marries Samad, but though she is younger than her

husband, she is no less spirited: Alsana is headstrong, determined, and unafraid of expressing her own opinions. She is brusque, serious, and often finds aspects of Western culture off-putting, but she also demands respect from her husband. When Samad sends Magid to Bangladesh without her knowledge, she refuses to answer any question from him with a "yes" or "no," in order to force him to live with the same kind of uncertainty she has—she never knows whether or not Magid is safe in Bangladesh. Alsana also develops a close friendship with Clara Bowden Jones, the wife of Samad's best friend Archie Jones.

Marcus Chalfen – Marcus Chalfen is the patriarch of the Chalfen family, an Oxbridge-educated scientist ("Oxbridge" refers to the prestigious British universities Cambridge and Oxford). Marcus has four sons: Joshua, Benjamin, Jack, and Oscar. He is boisterous, arrogant, and at times somewhat tactless—he's prone to making inappropriate or sexually charged comments (particularly about Irie Jones and about his wife, Joyce). However, Marcus is also intelligent and driven. His **FutureMouse** project, a study in genetic experimentation, is a source of major conflict in the latter half of the novel, dividing the Chalfen, Iqbal, and Jones families—in part because Magid Iqbal becomes one of Marcus's collaboraters on the project. Marcus's "Chalfenist" ways—his reliance on and faith in scientific rationality—can be seen to symbolize European or Western values. By strictly controlling the FutureMouse, his genetic experiment, Marcus effectively colonizes the animal in the name of science and progress, just as European countries colonized non-Western countries under the guise of helping these countries "develop."

Joyce Chalfen – Joyce is the matriarch of the Chalfen family, and an acclaimed botanist and writer. She is the wife of Marcus and the mother of four sons: Joshua, Benjamin, Jack, and Oscar. Joyce writes about "gardens of diversity and interest," recommending that gardeners use the process of cross-pollination to create more beautiful gardens. She is also fascinated by people of different cultures and ethnicities, notably Millat, who begins visiting her home after he, Irie, and Josh are caught smoking marijuana (their headmaster punishes them by enforcing visits with the Chalfens, whom he believes will be a good influence on the children). Joyce cares for Millat, but her concern is often misguided, since she believes that Millat needs to be "saved" from himself and from his "traumatic" upbringing; she also exhibits a noticeable lack of cultural sensitivity, frequently referring to inaccurate racial stereotypes.

Joshua Chalfen – Joshua is the son of Joyce and Marcus, and the oldest brother of Benjamin, Jack, and Oscar. Josh is a student at Glenard Oak who knows Irie Jones from orchestra class. He is intelligent (considered a "nerd" by his peers) but also wishes to fit in with the other students: he takes the blame for providing the marijuana that he, Irie, and Millat are caught smoking one day at recess. Joshua grows jealous of Millat and Magid, since his parents develop relationships with both boys, neglecting their own children; he eventually leaves the Chalfen house to focus on FATE, an animal rights organization that opposes Marcus's **FutureMouse** project. Joshua intends participate in a staged protest FATE plans for the FutureMouse launch event, which would involve Crispin, a FATE leader, pretending to take Josh hostage in front of his father, in order to force Marcus to surrender the mouse, his treasured scientific experiment. Ultimately, however, Josh decides not to go through with the plan and accepts his place in the Chalfen family instead. He and Irie end up in a relationship at the end of the novel, and he eventually helps her raise her child.

Hortense Bowden – Hortense is Clara's mother and Irie's grandmother, daughter to Ambrosia and born in the midst of the 1907 Kingston, Jamaica earthquake. Hortense is a strict woman and a devout Jehovah's Witness who believes that the end of the world is fast approaching. She spars with Clara about her marriage to Archie Jones and her lack of piety, but she has a soft spot for Irie, who lives with her for several months. She also forms a close bond with Clara's first boyfriend, Ryan Topps, who becomes a Jehovah's Witness and eventually lives with and cares for Hortense.

Captain Charlie Durham – Captain Charlie Durham is a British colonist posted to Jamaica in the early 20th century, where he meets Ambrosia Bowden, the daughter of his landlady. He impregnates Ambrosia, who later gives birth to their daughter Clara. After the Kingston earthquake of 1907, he attempts to marry Ambrosia, but she rebuffs him.

Crispin – Crispin is Joely's boyfriend and a co-founder of FATE (Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation). He's a somewhat maniacal, forceful activist who plans out FATE's demonstration at the **FutureMouse** conference—he plans to pretend to take Joshua Chalfen hostage in order to force Marcus Chalfen to surrender the mouse, but the plan goes awry in part because Joshua backs out.

Mangal Pande – Mangal Pande is Samad's alleged great-grandfather, an Indian sepoy (an Indian soldier serving under British direction) who shot the first bullet of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, though it is unclear whether this action was heroic or motivated by foolishness (or drunkenness). Pande unsuccessfully attempted to commit suicide to protest the British army's use of bullets smeared with pig fat (a sacrilegious act to Hindus), and he never became the martyr he intended to be. Samad defends his ancestor's legacy throughout the novel and is inspired by his example, but other characters—notably Archie (who, ironically, fails to commit suicide at the beginning of the novel)—criticize him as a misguided fool and a coward. Pande was also a real-life historical figure.

Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard – Sir Glenard was a ruthless colonist and the founder of Glenard Oak Comprehensive

School, which was originally a workhouse for Jamaican immigrants. Sir Glenard lived in Kingston, Jamaica, around the turn of the 20th century, and he attempted to seduce Ambrosia Bowden just before the Kingston earthquake of 1907 (in which he died).

Shiva Bhagwati – Shiva is a good-looking Hindu waiter at the curry restaurant where Samad works. Shiva often mocks Samad for his age and intellectualism, but he also gives Samad advice on dealing with Poppy Burt-Jones: he insists that relationships between white women and East Asian men will never work because there is "too much bloody history" between them.

Ryan Topps – Ryan Topps is Clara Bowden's former boyfriend, an awkward, lanky, red-headed boy who also attends her high school. Clara and Ryan date briefly, but Hortense, Clara's mother, manages to convert Ryan to the Jehovah's Witnesses; he becomes a devout worshipper and attempts to "save" Clara after she leaves the religion. Later in the novel, he is revealed to have moved in with Hortense, serving as a kind of live-in aide to her.

Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret (Dr. Sick) – During World War II, Archie and Samad encounter Dr. Perret, a young French scientist and Nazi collaborator, in Bulgaria, where he is hiding out in a decrepit house. Dr. Perret is nicknamed "Dr. Sick" because he suffers from a chronic illness that makes him appear to weep blood. Dr. Perret helped the Nazis with genetic experiments designed to wipe out non-Aryan races, and Archie and Samad take it upon themselves to kill the doctor as their final—and only—act of war heroism. Archie, however, cannot decide whether to follow through with the killing, and after flipping a coin, he decides to let the doctor go free (unbeknownst to Samad). Dr. Perret later becomes a mentor to Marcus Chalfen, agreeing to supervise the **FutureMouse** project. Millat attempts to assassinate Dr. Perret at the FutureMouse launch event, but Archie saves him again by diving in the pathway of the bullet.

Kelvin Hero – Kelvin is Archie's boss at MorganHero, a printing firm. He tells Archie that other (white) employees at the company were made uncomfortable by the presence of Archie's wife Clara, a black woman, at the company dinner, and he bribes Archie with Luncheon Vouchers to keep him from attending subsequent dinners with Clara.

Horst Ibelgaufts – Horst is a mysterious Swedish gynecologist who competed with Archie in track cycling at the 1948 Olympics in London (they tied for 13th place, a fact omitted from the Olympic record by accident). Though Horst and Archie never reunite, Horst sends Archie multiple letters throughout the novel, all of which seem to resonate with Archie's life.

Brother Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah – Brother Ibrahim is the founder of KEVIN, "an impressive man with a formidable reputation" but a poor orator. He was born to "Presbyterian dipsomaniacs" in Barbados, but he converted to Islam after a "vision." After studying Arabic for five years, he began to write radical pamphlets on Islam, eventually locking himself in "his aunt's Birmingham garage" for five years to study the Qur'an (earning him the nickname "The Guru in the Garage").

Darcus Bowden – Darcus is Clara's father, an "odiferous, moribund, salivating old man" who, before his death, rarely moved from his position in a bug-infested armchair in a corner of the Bowdens' home. He came over from Jamaica 14 years before his wife, Hortense, and daughter, ostensibly to earn enough money for them to join him, but he became afflicted by "the most incredible lethargy," creating "a lifelong affection for the dole [welfare], the armchair, and British television."

Mr. J. P. Hamilton – Mr. Hamilton is an older white man, "reminiscent of some genteel elderly eagle," whom Millat, Magid, and Irie visit as part of a community initiative for their school. He terrifies the children with his stories about the Congo war, explaining that he could identify a Congolese soldier "by the whiteness of his teeth."

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ambrosia Bowden – Ambrosia is Clara's grandmother and Irie's great-grandmother, a Jamaican woman who becomes pregnant by Captain Charlie Durham, an Englishman, in the early 20th century. While pregnant, Ambrosia becomes a Jehovah's Witness, but Hortense is the only descendent who inherits her piety.

Neena Begum – Neena is Alsana Begum's niece. Alsana often calls her "Niece of Shame," in reference to Neena's untraditional ways: unlike Alsana, she swears, talks openly about sex and feminism, and is a lesbian (which Alsana disapproves of).

Poppy Burt-Jones – Poppy is the music teacher at Glenard Oak Comprehensive School. She is a friendly redheaded woman who prides herself on her cultural awareness, though her comments about Indian culture are often misguided. She has a brief affair with Samad Iqbal.

Mickey (Abdul-Mickey) – Mickey is the owner and cook at O'Connell's Poolroom, Archie and Samad's favorite pub. He has an acne-like skin condition and is gruff but friendly with his patrons; all of his sons are named "Abdul," like himself.

Joely – Joely is a young woman who leads FATE (Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation), the animal rights organization Joshua Chalfen joins after meeting Joely and her boyfriend, Crispin. Joely is firmly committed to her cause, and Joshua is deeply in love with her (though she does not reciprocate his feelings).

Mrs. Brenton – Mrs. Brenton is "a fiery Scottish spinster" who works at the Jamaican Methodist Church in Kingston and who introduces Ambrosia Bowden to the Jehovah's Witness

religion.

Mrs. Olive Roody – Mrs. Roody is a severe Scottish woman and Irie's English teacher at Glenard Oak.

Ophelia Diagilo – Ophelia is Archie's first wife, an Italian immigrant he meets after the end of World War II. She undergoes a mental breakdown, believing herself to be the "maid of the celebrated fifteenth-century art lover Cosimo de' Medici," and the two separate.

Mo Hussein-Ishmael – Mo is the owner of the butcher shop on Cricklewood Broadway who discovers Archie attempting to commit suicide near his store. Mo's shop is the target of several racist attacks, and in response, he becomes radicalized and joins KEVIN.

Tim Westleigh (Merlin) – Tim is a party-goer at the End of the World party that Clara and Archie attend in 1975. He is the guest who invites Archie in, encouraged by his "huge, innocent, sweetly expectant" face.

Ardashir Mukhul – Ardashir is the owner of the curry house where Samad works and one of Samad's distant cousins. He is delighted by the power he exercises over Samad, whom he views as his "older, cleverer, handsomer cousin."

Maxine – Maxine is Neena's girlfriend, a "sexy and slender girl" with "a beautiful porcelain face, dark eyes, and a lot of curly brown hair." Maxine is flirtatious and energetic; like Neena, she represents a new kind of liberated, empowered modern womanhood.

Captain Thomas Dickinson-Smith – Captain Dickinson-Smith is the leader of Archie and Samad's World War II battalion ("the Buggered Battalion"), forced to become a soldier like his father and other male relatives, all of whom died on foreign battle fields. He is a closeted homosexual who secretly desires Samad.

Roy Mackintosh – Roy is a cruel, racist soldier in the "Buggered Battalion" who dislikes Samad greatly. His fiancé, a hairdresser, "slipped on a set of rollers and broke her neck on the sink," which motivated him to go to war.

Will Johnson – Will is a somewhat "simple," patriotic British soldier in the "Buggered Battalion."

Gozan – Gozan is a café owner in Bulgaria whom Archie and Samad befriend.

Nikolai Pesotsky – Nikolai is a Russian soldier Archie and Samad meet in Bulgaria who captures Dr. Perret, and who allows Samad to "have" Dr. Perret (to take him captive and kill him) as a prize for winning a poker game.

Katie Miniver – Katie Miniver is the chairwoman of the parent-governors' board at Glenard Oak, a "lanky white divorcée" who argues with Samad over the inclusion of the Harvest Festival in the school's event calendar.

Zinat Mahal – Zinat is the wife of Samad's cousin, who runs a local discount shop; she is known as a local gossip.

Mad Mary – Mad Mary is a "black voodoo woman with a red face," one of the homeless people in Willesden, who harasses Samad and Poppy Burt-Jones.

Abdul-Jimmy and Abdul-Colin – Adbul-Jimmy and Abdul-Colin are Mickey's sons, both of whom join KEVIN. Abdul-Colin is particularly radicalized against the West, criticizing the English for having "no faith."

Denzel and Clarence – Denzel and Clarence are two older, impolite Jamaican men who are a fixture at O'Connell's—Archie and Samad's favorite bar—where they play dominoes in a corner. Denzel is "impossibly fat," and Clarence is "horribly thin."

Dipesh, Hifan, Rajik, and Ranil – These four teenagers are Millat's South Asian friends, who style themselves as young gangsters and call themselves "Raggastani" (referring to "raga," a type of Jamaican music, and "stan," short for Pakistan). Hifan later recruits Millat for KEVIN, the fundamentalist Muslim brotherhood.

Varin – Varin is Mo Hussein-Ishmael's trainee, a "massively overweight Hindu boy."

Arshad – Arshad is Mo Hussein-Ishmael's son and employee, a "skinny guy with a handlebar mustache."

Andrea – Andrea is a hairdresser at P.K.'s Afro Hair who accidentally burns off Irie's hair when she comes into the shop to have it relaxed.

Jackie – Jackie is another hairdresser at P.K.'s, who identifies Irie as "half-caste"—meaning that she is biracial.

Mr. Paul King – Mr. King is a white man in his mid-50s who owns P.K.'s Afro Hair, a salon for black women. He opened the salon after realizing how much money he could make exploiting low-income black women's desire to meet idealized beauty standards.

The Headmaster of Glenard Oak – The headmaster of Irie and Millat's school is a "bleeding-heart liberal" who believes in the "edifying" power of the school and hopes to fix problems between students civilly, without "behaviour chastisement."

Noel – Noel is an office worker at MorganHero, quiet and somewhat irascible.

Maureen – Maureen is another office worker at MorganHero, who finds Archie's biracial relationship with Clara bizarre and unnatural.

Sol Jozefowicz – Sol s an old man who takes it upon himself to police Kilburn Park, even after his park-keeper job ended; he is likely a Holocaust survivor.

Benjamin, Jack, and Oscar Chalfen – Benjamin, Jack, and Oscar are the younger sons of Joyce and Marcus Chalfen. They are aged 14, 12, and six, all "bouncy, curly-haired boys," "articulate and amusing."

Karina Cain – Karina is one of the young women Millat sleeps with. Though it isn't "just sex" with Karina for Millat, he

eventually breaks up with her after committing himself to KEVIN.

Kenny – Kenny is a "psychotic ex-postal worker" who "witnessed his father kill his puppy" as a child. He is a member of FATE.

Paddy – Paddy is a "sensitive lifetime dole collection and pigeon-fancier," and a member of FATE.

Tyrone A member of KEVIN.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FAMILY TIES

White Teeth follows a handful of families—some immigrants, other native-born citizens—living in London during the late 20th century. Despite their different backgrounds, each family experiences similar dilemmas: the children choose different paths from their parents, and the parents struggle to connect with their children. Though the intertwined Jones, Iqbal, and Chalfen families are shown to be both highly fragmented and dysfunctional throughout *White Teeth*, none of the characters are able to break away completely from their family backgrounds. Familial ties prove complicated and challenging, and yet ultimately too significant to leave behind altogether. The novel is concerned with the way in which modern relationships—between others and with one's own self—are often provisional, unstable, and constantly in flux. While family relationships are not impervious to change, they tend to be more resilient and lasting than other bonds in the novel, demonstrating the importance of family in Smith's telling of modern society.

The most obvious act of family fracturing in the novel is Samad Iqbal's separation of his twin sons, Millat and Magid, in an attempt to restore his family's ties to tradition and Islam. He sends Magid, whom he considers more primed for Islamic education than Millat, to Bangladesh. Though Millat and Magid grow up to develop different identities—Magid's British-influenced atheism and devout support of Marcus Chalfen's genetic experiments, versus Millat's extreme Muslim fundamentalism, which leads him to oppose his brother and Chalfen—the brothers continue to bear similarities to each other. For example, both boys break their noses at the same age, ensuring that their physical appearances continue to match; Irie Jones has sex with both of them and becomes pregnant, never verifying the paternity and thus fusing their identities further.

Though Millat despises Magid's atheism and the calm, philosophical attitude he adopts after living in Bangladesh, the brothers are eventually united, since they are both identified as the perpetrator of Dr. Perret's attempted assassination (actually orchestrated by Millat), the former Nazi doctor who directs Marcus Chalfen's **FutureMouse** project, an experiment in genetic testing. The brothers are then forced to carry out community service together. Millat and Magid develop distinct personalities, each in reaction to their direct environments: Magid's dissatisfaction with "backwards" Pakistani society, Millat's rage and disillusionment with racist, Western London culture. These personality developments separate the brothers from their family culture, controlled by Samad, whose strict adherence to Islam contradicts both Magid's scientific, irreligious ideas and Millat's extreme orthodoxy. Though the brothers' ideological and philosophical differences are not resolved by the novel's end, the many parallels in their lives emphasize that they're still brothers and bound, irrevocably, by that relationship.

Like Magid and Millat, who initially break off from their family only to be eventually reunited, Joshua Chalfen becomes disillusioned with his father's "Chalfenist" values, and defies them by joining the animal rights group FATE ("Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation"), which opposes Marcus's FutureMouse project. Just as Magid and Millat change their worldviews, adapting to new ideology that they discover apart from their families, Josh seeks to separate himself from his family's highbrow intellectualism and adherence to scientific values. Marcus and his wife, Joyce, a horticulturist who focuses on plant breeding, prioritize order, organization, and logical reasoning, while Joshua becomes rebellious and independent. Joshua is motivated both by a desire to fit in with other students at school who come from less privileged backgrounds—he takes the blame for a joint that Irie and Millat are discovered smoking, for example—and by his jealousy of Millat and Magid, who become the objects of his parents' obsession. Realizing that he cannot compete with the Iqbal brothers, Joshua finds a new family in FATE.

Yet when Josh realizes that FATE, led by a determined, if somewhat erratic, couple, Joely and Crispin, is determined to take down his father, he begins to understand his inextricable connection to "Chalfenism" and his deep loyalty toward his family: "he never felt that he'd betrayed his father—the weight of what he was doing never really hit him—until he heard Chalfenism ridiculed out of Crispin's mouth." Josh feels that he is "facing the end of the world" by leading FATE in a head-to-head battle against his father, and he begins to understand that FATE's plan—to pretend to hold Josh ransom in front of the audience assembled for the FutureMouse press conference on New Year's Eve—is ill-fated, since "they have underestimated the power of Chalfenism and its remarkable commitment to

the Rational." Marcus's adherence to rationalism and scientific values mean that he might not value his own son above his own scientific discoveries. Even though Josh realizes that "it is quite possible that love doesn't even come into it"—meaning Marcus's relationship to his family, which he regards as only one part of a life system governed by rationality and logic—he also feels comforted and relieved by his rediscovery of and reconnection to "Chalfenism" and its power. "Just thinking about that makes Joshua smile": Josh feels an emotional pull toward his family values, despite their often problematic nature.

Smith proposes no easy resolution to Josh's rebellion against his family, only suggesting that he turns away from FATE and toward "Chalfenism" in this crucial moment at the end of the novel. Yet this turning point—followed shortly by Magid and Millat's union, after the attempted assassination at the FutureMouse conference—confirms the strength of family ties. Millat, Magid, and Josh are wayward sons brought back into their family's orbit, despite their distinct personalities, ideas, and personal development. Instead of suggesting that these characters forfeit their ideological differences in order to return to their families, Smith shows that family structures are tenable even when family members are wildly different from one another. Though relationships within families fluctuate, they remain an important and ultimately unavoidable part of life.

RACE, RACISM, AND MULTICULTURALISM

White Teeth focuses on the lives of Londoners of different ethnicities and class positions, with distinct cultural backgrounds and relationships to their British identities. The Bowdens and Iqbals are recent immigrants, while Archie Jones and the Chalfen family are more established Britons who benefit from their status as "authentic" white English nationals. In charting the microaggressions that many of its non-white characters face, the novel suggests that racism is deeply embedded in British culture. Although these pernicious racial divisions abounding in late 20th-century England will be challenging to dismantle, the novel provides some hope for a peaceful multicultural world through the younger generation of Londoners, who form positive relationships with each other.

Systemic racism greatly impacts the Iqbals' lives, starting with Samad, who, though educated and accomplished—having fought for the British Army in World War II—is unable to find employment in London that is more advanced or lucrative than serving as a waiter in a curry house. The novel details instances of microaggressions that Samad experiences over several decades. Samad, the only non-white man in his World War II regiment, is treated with disrespect by his fellow Army officers. Years later, he is also treated like an outsider in London, where his children attend a middle-class school. In light of this treatment, Samad becomes confused and distressed, both attracted to aspects of Western society—evidenced by his affair with Poppy Burt-Jones, which he regards, guiltily, as a thoroughly Western vice—and opposed to them: for example, he is determined to expose his son Millat to a strict Islamic upbringing.

In addition to describing the way racism and racial divisions affect Samad, the novel defies the idea that several of its white characters, including Poppy Burt-Jones and Joyce Chalfen, uphold: that racial and cultural differences are easily approached, understood, and overcome. Both characters are presented as misguided and frequently offensive in their interactions with non-white people. Poppy, for instance, assumes that Samad is Indian—though he is from Bangladesh—and is attracted to him for the exoticism he seems to represent. Meanwhile, Joyce, determined to "nurture" others like plants, makes inaccurate, reductive assumptions about Irie, Millat, and Magid's relationships with their parents, implying that "brown" people "don't appreciate their children sufficiently." By assuming that they understand others' racial identities—that it is easy to bridge the gap between their own and others' experiences of ethnic and cultural differences—Joyce and Poppy demonstrate a simplistic, unproductive, and harmful understanding of race. The novel shows Samad, Irie Jones, Millat, and Magid to be far more complicated and nuanced figures than Poppy and Joyce imagine them to be, suggesting that only individuals who live with a certain racial identity can understand the experience of this identity.

However, while the younger characters in the novels do not resolve or transcend racial conflicts, they provide an alternative, and markedly more positive, image of race relations. Unlike Samad, Irie does not choose to separate herself from society as a result of the racist incidents she has experienced (including being called racist slurs by her classmates). As a part of a second, younger generation of multicultural Londoners, she is accustomed to racial differences and the friction such differences can create. Her school, Glenard Oak, is filled with children of different cultures and ethnicities; though racism is present at Glenard Oak, Irie's friendships with her peers, namely Millat, Magid, and Josh Chalfen, persist throughout the novel, unaffected by racial divisions. By the end of the novel, Irie, Millat, Magid, and Josh have formed a family of sorts—Irie and Josh are raising her daughter, who calls Millat and Magid (who may each be her father) "uncles"—suggesting their unity in the face of racial strife.

Even though racism and racial difference cause several characters, including Samad and Millat (who joins the extremist group KEVIN), to break off from society, becoming angry, resentful, and even violent, the novel also provides an image of

peaceful cultural coexistence through the characters of Irie, Millat, Magid, and Josh. Though the novel argues that racial differences, and the devastating effects of racism, cannot be put aside easily, *White Teeth* also presents a tentatively optimistic view of racial and cultural exchange in modern society, considering the ways in which race and ethnicity impact individuals, creating distinct narratives for them, yet do not always drive these individuals apart.

FEMALE INDEPENDENCE

Set in the late 1980s and 1990s, *White Teeth* examines a cultural milieu in which women are able to grasp a kind of tenuous independence and power, though they are simultaneously inhibited by the system in which they live. Clara Jones and Alsana Iqbal—the novel's main female characters—are portrayed as determined, intelligent, and driven, yet ultimately subject to forces of patriarchy, and resigned to precarious, marginalized positions in society. *White Teeth* charts these women's trajectories over several years and generations, detailing their efforts to find and demonstrate their own independence, provide for their families, and understand their place in the world, all against the backdrop of a challenging, frequently sexist modern world. Through these two women's struggles and triumphs, Smith suggests that the fight for female independence is a constant uphill battle, even in a modern world.

Clara Jones, born Clara Bowden, is the first female character introduced in the novel, and one who experiences conflicting desires—for both independence, free of male influence, as well as stability within patriarchy—that make it difficult for her to realize the potential of her own individuality. At the beginning of the novel, Clara defies her stringent religious upbringing to follow the rebellious path of her teenage crush, Ryan Topps. Yet while Ryan is shown to be only superficially rebellious—eventually devoting himself to the Jehovah's Witness dogma Clara has abandoned—Clara is bold, adventurous, and headstrong. She develops an independent nature without his influence and embeds herself in a radically different world from the one in which she grew up. Interacting with Ryan's "company of Hippies, Flakes, Freaks, and Funky Folk," Clara makes friends: "a resourceful girl, she use[s] what she had to amuse and terrify" these radical types.

Yet Clara is also keenly aware that in order to live with some independence, separating herself from the influence of her strict, commanding mother Hortense and her religious teachings, she requires a safety net. Clara realizes that she needs a husband to provide for her and to bestow her with a fixed, determined social position: wife. Thus, Clara enters into a largely loveless marriage with Archie Jones, whom she finds uninteresting, though tolerable; she sacrifices much of her independent spirit in order to conform to a societally acceptable role.

Alsana Iqbal, born Alsana Begum, is similarly described as bold and ambitious, able to support her husband and family by working tirelessly as a seamstress, and unafraid of expressing her true opinions. Alsana admits that every time she learns something about Samad—with whom she had an arranged marriage—she likes him less: "so you see, we were better off the way we were," before marriage, she declares. Though she calls herself a "barefoot country girl," Alsana's social status does not determine her knowledge of the world. She understands that her livelihood is circumscribed by her husband and his unsatisfactory ways, and that she lives a life confined by his desires and abilities.

Though both Clara and Alsana are limited by their marriages and overshadowed by their husbands, throughout *White Teeth* both women demonstrate self-reliance, individuality, and a propensity for independent thinking, even within the confines of domesticity. Though Clara has less of a presence in the latter half of the novel, it is mentioned that she enrolls in classes at a local university, and she and Alsana develop a friendship that rivals Archie and Samad's. Clara also exercises control over Archie in their shared household: Archie fears "Clara's wrath" when Samad instructs him to keep his daughter Irie home from the school's fall festival. She maintains a garden of her own and develops a caring, though complicated, relationship with her daughter—while Archie grows relatively distant from Irie.

Similarly, Alsana asserts her own independence and strength as a mother, even within her own contentious household, troubled by frequent conflicts between Alsana, Samad, and their sons. When Samad decides to separate Magid and Millat in order to send Magid to Bangladesh, Alsana decides to "stop speaking directly to her husband" for eight years, forcing him "to live like she [does]" in Magid's absence—"never knowing, never being sure," since she is unable to know if Magid is safe in Bangladesh. Though Alsana, like Clara, is unable to free herself from the inhibiting binds of marriage—since marriage and family life provide both women with a definite place in society—she manages to preserve her own tempestuous, powerful spirit, defying Samad's authority as a father and patriarch. In many ways, Alsana and Clara work harder at maintaining their families and careers than their husbands, who waste time drinking, gambling, and, in Samad's case, having an affair. This effort is rarely acknowledged by other characters—including Alsana and Clara's children, who are often resentful or distant from their mothers—yet it suggests their unflappable resilience in the face of marginalization.

Ultimately, however, *White Teeth* gestures toward a potentially different future for women. At the end of the novel, O'Connell's Pub, the all-male den that Archie and Samad frequent, is opened up to women for the first time, and Alsana and Clara are able to visit it, along with their husbands. Moreover, Irie, Clara's daughter, represents the next generation of women in British society, for whom social norms and gender expectations

have changed. Unlike Alsana and Clara, she does not think of marriage as her only option for survival, and though she becomes pregnant at a young age, she ends up with a man (Joshua Chalfen) who is not her child's father.

Alsana and Clara could be seen as characters who pave the way for Irie's own assertions of independence, since they stridently demonstrate individuality and opinionated thinking, even as societal norms and boundaries constrain their own narratives and life paths. *White Teeth* does not always foreground women's experiences—choosing to begin with Archie's story, for example, and focusing heavily on Samad as a character—but it gives voice to complicated women, detailing the complexities, strengths, weaknesses, and potential opportunities that motherhood and womanhood encompassed in late 20th-century London.

THE INFLUENCE OF HISTORY

From the outset of the novel, Samad Iqbal is described as a character with a deep attachment to history—one that keeps him mired in the past. Upon meeting Marcus Chalfen, whose genetic experiments are intended to bring about an improved future, Irie Jones reflects that "there existed fathers who," unlike Samad, "dealt in the present, who didn't drag ancient history around like a ball and chain. So there were men who were not neck-deep and sinking in the quagmire of the past." In particular, Samad is obsessed with the story of Mangal Pande, a Hindu soldier he claims to be related to, who fired the first shot of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 (attempted suicide as a political statement). It is rumored, though, that Pande was not a hero but a foolhardy drunk. Nonetheless, Samad chooses to believe that Pande's actions were revolutionary, and that this story demonstrates the greatness and courage inherent in the Iqbal line, suggesting his fierce belief that the past powerfully impacts those who inherit it. Though Samad is often ridiculed for his faith in history, White Teeth shows that Samad has a reason to be attached. The past exercises control over the present, and even as characters attempt to free themselves from its binds, they are forced to confront narratives from the past.

Samad's son Millat is also fixated on the story of Mangal Pande, which informs his decisions about how to respond to the **FutureMouse** project. Though Pande and Millat's stories are separated by over a century, their twinned narratives highlight how the past informs the present. Spurred on by the extremist group KEVIN, Millat resolves to assassinate Dr. Perret, who is working on the FutureMouse project with Marcus Chalfen, since KEVIN believes that genetic experimentation runs counter to Islamic belief. Yet Millat is equally inspired by the story of Mangal Pande, since he believes that he can change the past, acting with a kind of conviction that Pande—who was likely a drunk, not a revolutionary—failed to claim for himself: "Because Millat was here to finish it. To revenge it. To turn that history around […] Where Pande misfooted he would step sure." Though Millat is already respected by the other members of KEVIN (and adored by numerous women), he feels deeply insecure and uncertain about his own decisions, fluctuating between rebellion and extreme orthodoxy. Ultimately, though, Millat is unable to assassinate Dr. Perret, since Archie Jones steps in front of the bullet. Like Pande, then, Millat's attempts to take action and prove his worth and passion for a political cause are ultimately futile: by himself "misfooting," Millat inherits Pande's own narrative.

Samad's own character arc, too, aligns with Pande's story, since his efforts to make a name for himself in London, his adopted home, are more ineffectual than productive. He struggles with his own diminished place in a society that marginalizes him on the basis of race, and, like Millat, he worries about the nature of his own desires, which he believe contradict Islamic teachings. Thus, Samad and Millat replicate Pande's narrative, even as they seek to subvert it—by using Pande's weakness to stimulate their own action and strength.

Additionally, Dr. Perret's reappearance at the end of the novel also represents history's hold over the present, albeit in a much more sinister way. Originally introduced as the Nazi prisoner Samad and Archie capture during their stint as soldiers in World War II—an infamous French scientist who helped the Nazis carry out gruesome ethnic cleansing experiments to "purify" society—Dr. Perret reappears as a major player in Marcus Chalfen's FutureMouse project. Though the project is not overtly racist, it is still concerned with genetic experimentation, with potential links to eugenics. Thus, it seems that Dr. Perret never actually changed his ways, though Archie—who was tasked with killing him during the war—let him live, deciding his fate based on a coin toss. Dr. Perret represents the potentially destructive ways in which history does not always resolve itself: past evil returns to haunt the present.

Moreover, Archie's decision to save Dr. Perret from Millat's assassination attempt demonstrates the way in which the novel's characters seem to inevitably repeat narratives from the past—even though this contradicts Archie's own life philosophy. Throughout *White Teeth*, Archie insists on the power of chance, choosing to make decisions based on a coin toss. Unlike Samad, he does not believe in destiny: instead, he embraces life as chaotic and random. On one hand, Archie's decision to save the doctor again—after saving him during the war—might represent his firm belief that decisions made by chance, at random, must be upheld: he might believe that he needs to repeat the decision produced by the coin flip he made during the war. Yet it also suggests that history is impossible to overwrite, since both times, Archie saves the doctor, repeating a previous event. Like Millat and Samad, playing out Pande's narrative, Archie plays out his own narrative from the past, repeating actions, decisions, and outcomes that have already

been made. In a flashback, Dr. Perret shoots Archie in the leg after the coin flip; at the FutureMouse conference, the bullet intended for Dr. Perret strikes Archie as he dives in front of Millat's gun. In this way, time becomes cyclical: "every moment happens twice," the novel's narrator affirms, suggesting that history's repetitive nature is inescapable, despite Archie's reliance on chance.

White Teeth's frequent flashbacks and forays into the stories of previous generations create a structure in which past and present are closely intertwined, and often, nearly identical. When the two women are pregnant with their children, Alsana Iqbal tells Clara Bowden that their "bumps" "will always have daddy long-legs for fathers. One leg in the present, one in the past. No talking will change this. Their roots will always be tangled. And roots get dug up." While this is true for Irie, Millat, and Magid, who are frequently exposed to their family history and backgrounds, it also holds true for Samad and Archie themselves, who inevitably replay events from the past, despite their efforts to avoid this certainty. The stories of the past become the stories of the present—as in the story of Mangal Pande and Dr. Perret—and the novel's characters find themselves returning to decisions and actions that have already occurred, bringing these moments back to life.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TEETH

Not only do teeth factor into the novel's title, they are also a recurrent symbol throughout the narrative, with several layers of symbolic significance. Importantly, the titular reference to "white teeth" alludes to an early moment in the novel in which Irie, Millat, and Magid visit Mr. J. P. Hamilton, an older and highly racist man in their neighborhood. Mr. Hamilton tells the children that when he was in the Congo, "the only way [he] could identify a nigger was by the whiteness of his teeth." On one hand, white teeth—contrasted with dark skin—represent the vulnerability of non-white people: throughout the novel, the non-white characters experience prejudice and are confronted by racist microaggressions that draw attention to their status as outsiders in British society. Yet white teeth are also popularly considered an attractive feature, and indeed, the novel characterizes non-white individuals as intelligent, vivacious, and complex, combatting the negative stereotypes upheld by white characters like Mr. Hamilton.

In the novel, teeth are also closely connected to history and its pernicious influence over the present. Chapters dealing specifically with characters' histories refer to root canals ("The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal," "The Root Canals of Mangal Pande," "The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden"), a process in which infections are removed from teeth roots. Just as a root canal involves searching for a hidden problem at the root of the tooth, these chapters examine the underlying events and conflicts that affect the characters or their descendants (so Hortense Bowden and Mangal Pande's actions and experiences affect Clara and Irie Bowden, and Samad Iqbal, respectively). Moreover, the narrator notes that "old secrets," like wisdom teeth, "will come out [...] when the time is right."

Wisdom teeth also represent the various secrets that characters keep from each other throughout the novel, all of which are eventually revealed, despite the characters' best efforts at concealing them: for example, Archie reveals to Samad that he did not kill Dr. Perret, and Clara reveals to Irie that she wears false teeth (having had hers knocked out during a scooter accident with Ryan Topps). Additionally, Irie professes a desire to become a dentist, suggesting her propensity for uncovering hidden problems; she is also the only character in the novel to carefully examine her family history, discovering its blemishes (whereas Samad, for example, refuses to see his ancestor Mangal Pande as anything other than a clear hero). Ultimately, teeth are a shape-shifting symbol in the text, highlighting issues of race, history, and relationships between characters and their families.

THE FUTUREMOUSE

The FutureMouse is Marcus Chalfen's genetic experiment, a mouse with altered DNA that Marcus uses to demonstrate the progression of disease and aging. The mouse's genetic makeup is changed so that certain traits associated with the disease develop at a predictable rate: Chalfen's idea is to exercise total control over a being, its characteristics, its development, and, ultimately, its death. The mouse is a point of extreme contention throughout the novel, fiercely debated by animal rights activists, fundamentalist Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses, all of whom see Marcus's goal of complete control as dangerous and counterproductive—either because the project is harmful to animals or, for the religious groups, because it directly challenges God's power and authority. Though Marcus (and Magid, who becomes his assistant) is firmly convinced of the scientific value of the experiment, the project has sinister undertones, similar to Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret's genetic experiments for the Nazis—designed to wipe out non-Aryan races by strictly controlling the gene pool. (Indeed, Dr. Perret is Marcus's mentor, and Marcus mentions that the doctor has taught him "everything he knows" about science.) Ultimately, the FutureMouse project fails, since in the struggle that ensues at the launch event—Millat's attempted assassination of Dr. Perret—the mouse escapes from its cage, suggesting that

Marcus is not able to exercise complete control over its destiny or will.

Thus, the FutureMouse seems to stand in for marginalized people who are targeted as populations to be controlled, including many of the non-white characters in the novel, who are frequently the subject of racist microaggressions: in the presence of the Iqbals and Irie and Clara Jones, native British people complain openly about the number of brown and black people that have "invaded" London, using the same kind of rhetoric that Nazis used to justify their program of racial elimination. By escaping at the novel's conclusion, the FutureMouse defies its own oppression, suggesting that the novel's non-white characters can resist subjugation, too, even when faced with forces of prejudice, racism, and outright evil. Indeed, the novel ends happily for the intertwined Iqbal, Bowden, and Chalfen families, who find ways to coexist peacefully in British society, despite its challenges and widespread xenophobia. The novel proposes no easy to solution to racism or anti-immigrant attitudes, but it does suggest that people of color can find and claim independence for themselves, like the FutureMouse.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *White Teeth* published in 2001.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Strangely, Daria was the final pulse of thought that passed through Archie just before he blacked out. It was the thought of a whore he met once twenty years ago, it was Daria and her smile that made him cover Mo's apron with tears of joy as the butcher saved his life. He had seen her in his mind: a beautiful woman in a doorway with a come-hither look; and realized he regretted not coming hither. If there was any chance of ever seeing a look like that again, then he wanted the second chance, he wanted the extra time. Not just this second, but the next and the next—all the time in the world.

Related Characters: Horst Ibelgaufts , Mo Hussein-Ishmael , Archibald (Archie) Jones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the novel, Archie Jones attempts to kill himself by inhaling fumes from his car near Mo Hussein-Ishamel's neighborhood butcher shop. Though the novel seems to begin with a somber ending—Archie's death—it quickly shifts in tone, since Archie experiences a miraculous rebirth: an event that sets the entire plot in motion. After Mo saves Archie, Archie decides that he wants "all the time in the world," and he joyfully accepts his second chance at life. He remembers a "whore" who he met with his friend, Horst Ibelgaufts, after they competed in the 1948 Olympics together, and the way that her "come-hither look" made him feel: excited for the future. Though Archie does not live a particularly exciting life after his attempted suicide, he does make the radical decision to marry Clara Jones, a confident, liberated woman who is many years younger than him. This marriage reinvigorates him, and he becomes a father, affording him "extra time" in the form of a legacy. This passage affirms the importance of memory and time in the novel, since a memory from the past motivates Archie's actions in the present—just as the past continuously influences the present throughout the novel.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Yet a residue, left over from the evaporation of Clara's faith, remained. She still wished for a savior. She still wished for a man to whisk her away, to choose her above others so that she might walk in *white with Him: for [she] was worthy. Revelation 3:4.*

Related Characters: Archibald (Archie) Jones , Ryan Topps, Hortense Bowden, Clara Bowden-Jones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Though she grows up timid and awkward, as a teenager, Clara Jones becomes steadfastly independent. Her romance with Ryan Topps, a rebellious but somewhat dull boy from her school, does not pan out, but she immerses herself in counterculture, eventually becoming an atheist—and defying the wishes of her highly religious mother, Hortense, a Jehovah's Witness. Yet Clara constantly grapples with her own ties to religion and faith, and she realizes that she needs a "savior" to help her feel assured of herself and understand her own place in the world: as a black woman and the child of immigrants, she is not fully integrated into British society. Though Clara is opinionated, motivated, and liberated, she still needs a "man to whisk her away" from her life in Lambeth, where she lives with her strict mother: she is self-empowered but still dependent on men, a tension that plays out throughout the novel.

Chapter 4 Quotes

"Talk, talk, talk and it will be better. Be honest, slice open your heart and spread the red stuff around. But the past is made of more than words, dearie. We married old men, you see? These bumps"—Alsana pats them both—"they will always have daddy-long-legs for fathers. One leg in the present, one in the past. No talking will change this. Their roots will always be tangled. And roots get dug up. Just look in my garden—birds at the coriander every bloody day. . ."

Related Characters: Alsana Iqbal (née Begum) (speaker), Clara Bowden-Jones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Alsana believes that the Western custom of "talking" and being "honest"—"slicing open your heart" to discuss feelings—is futile, since life, and especially family life, is too complicated to be "talked" away. Alsana's core belief is also a recurring theme in the novel: that the past is full of complications, and that "roots," or history, will always be "dug up," directly impacting the present. The novel's frequent foray into flashbacks and family histories demonstrate that the characters' lives are shaped by events experienced and decisions made in the past, and that these actions and choices are inextricably entangled. For example, Archie's history intertwines with Samad's when they are assigned to the same battalion in World War II, just as Millat, Magid, and Irie's histories intersect as they grow up together in London. Thus, Alsana is correct that these roots "will always be tangled," since these friendships and relationships only grow more complicated throughout the novel, as secrets are revealed, and conflicts are teased out.

Chapter 5 Quotes

It's all very well, this instruction of Alsana's to look at the thing close up; to look at it dead straight between the eyes; an unflinching and honest stare, a meticulous inspection that would go beyond the heart of the matter to its marrow, beyond the marrow to the root—but the question is how far back do you want? How far will do?

Related Characters: Clara Bowden-Jones, Alsana Iqbal (née Begum)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

Alsana tells Clara that she must "look at the thing close up" in order to see it for what it is: in this case, the "thing" is their husbands, who, at closer inspection, are unremarkable, unsuccessful men obsessed with the past. Alsana claims that looking closely at something reveals its flaws and takes away some of its authority. On this note, Clara sees her husband, Archie, for what he is, and this proves disappointing (since she originally thought of him as her "savior," capable of rescuing her from her confining life with Hortense, her pious mother).

The novel often exposes the ugly and unsettling truth behind certain aspects of the characters' lives. For example, Glenard Oak, the school that the Iqbal and Jones children attend, is revealed to have been founded as a workhouse for Jamaican immigrants, many of whom died in poverty after the workhouse shut down. In this passage, the narrator wonders whether it is better to search for the underlying problems and tensions at the "root" of all "things," or whether this only prompts us to see history as an endless array of irresolvable conflicts. The narrator asks if it might be better to leave questions of history unanswered: is ignorance really bliss? The conclusion that Irie Jones seems to come to by the end of the novel answers this question affirmatively. She imagines a time "where roots won't matter anymore"—where the past no longer exercises control over the present, and it is no longer necessary to look "beyond the marrow to the root" to examine the past.

Long, comfortable silences passed between them like those between women who have known each other for years. They looked out on to stars that lit up unknown country, but neither man clung particularly to home. In short, it was precisely the kind of friendship an Englishman makes on holiday, that he can make only on holiday. A friendship that crosses class and color, a friendship that takes as its basis physical proximity and survives because the Englishman assumes the physical proximity will not continue.

Related Characters: Samad Iqbal, Archibald (Archie) Jones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

Archie and Samad first become friends during World War II, when they are randomly assigned to the same battalion. Samad is mocked for being a "Paki," though he is actually Bangladeshi, but Archie treats him with grudging respect. Yet because they have distinct statuses in British society, their friendship is not natural: it seems to be temporary, only possible because the conditions of war have brought men of different social classes and standings together. Nonetheless, Archie and Samad's friendship does endure past their stint in the war, since they end up living in the same London neighborhood, where their lives run in parallel: they get married and have children at the same time, and both work mediocre, unsatisfying jobs. Though Archie, "the Englishman," is in a superior position to Samad in British society, the two men are in many ways more similar than different, suggesting that though racial differences determine hierarchies in British culture, they do not constitute insurmountable boundaries—and can be transcended, even after wartime.

"Do you know who this man is, Jones?" Samad grabbed the doctor by the back of his hair and bent his neck over the back seat. "The Russians told me. He's a scientist, like me—but what is his science? Choosing who shall be born and who shall not—breeding people as if they were so many chickens, destroying them if the specifications are not correct. He wants to control, to dictate the future. He wants a race of men, a race of indestructible men, that will survive the last days of this earth. But it cannot be done in a laboratory. It must be done, it can only be done, with faith! Only Allah saves! I am no religious man—I have never possessed the strength—but I am not fool enough to deny the truth!"

Related Characters: Millat Iqbal, Samad Iqbal, Archibald (Archie) Jones , Marcus Chalfen, Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret (Dr. Sick)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. Perret and his protégé, Marcus Chalfen, are scientists who believe that they can exercise control over species: mice for Marcus Chalfen (though he believes that his scientific findings are applicable to humans, too), and men for Dr. Perret, who works for the Nazis, attempting eugenics experiments designed to wipe out non-Aryan races. Yet they are not the only characters to desire power in the novel. Samad and Millat also hope to become "indestructible" by acting in ways that they consider heroic, thus leaving behind impressive legacies and making their mark on the world: Samad hopes to act heroically in the war, and Millat intends to assassinate Marcus Chalfen in the name of Islam (though both men ultimately fail). FATE and KEVIN—an animal rights group and a fundamentalist Islamic group, respectively—are also examples of individuals who look for ways to "dictate the future," like Dr. Perret, and powerfully impact the world, spreading their dogma far and wide. The novel shows that though these characters and groups have radically different beliefs, they share the same fundamental desire: to influence the course of history.

Chapter 6 Quotes

Magid really wanted to be in some other family. He wanted to own cats and not cockroaches, he wanted his mother to make the music of the cello, not the sound of the sewing machine; he wanted to have a trellis of flowers growing up one side of the house instead of the ever-growing pile of other people's rubbish; he wanted a piano in the hallway in place of the broken door off cousin Kurshed's car; he wanted to go on biking holidays to France, not day-trips to Blackpool to visit aunties; he wanted the floor of his room to be shiny wood, not the orange-and-green swirled carpet left over from the restaurant; he wanted his father to be a doctor, not a one-handed waiter; and this month Magid had converted all these desires into a wish to join in with the Harvest Festival like Mark Smith would.

Related Characters: Millat Iqbal, Magid Iqbal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

Magid and his brother Millat are heavily influenced by both their Bangladeshi parents and their childhood in London, and as teenagers, each of them turns to a different aspect of their upbringing in order to create their own identities. While Millat turns to a fundamentalist Islamic sect, Magid wants to immerse himself in middle-class English culture (hence, he asks his friends to call him "Mark Smith" instead of Magid). Even when Samad sends Magid to Bangladesh, he returns to English conversant in Anglican culture and literature, passionate about European values of science, rationality, and intellectualism. Ironically, Samad's efforts to shape his sons into observant Muslims connected to their Bangladeshi roots backfires, since Magid turns away from Eastern tradition, while Millat pursues an extremist version

of Islam that Samad finds shocking. Ultimately, the brothers are products of clashing cultures and influences, and they are connected to diverse traditions and customs. By the end of the novel, Samad realizes that they cannot be the perfect sons he desires, and that he himself cannot completely free himself from Western culture and society.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ O'Connell's is the kind of place family men come to for a different kind of family. Unlike blood relations, it is necessary here to earn one's position in the community; it takes years of devoted fucking around, time-wasting, lying-about, shooting the breeze, watching paint dry—far more dedication than men invest in the careless moment of procreation. You need to know the place. For example, there are reasons why O'Connell's is an Irish poolroom run by Arabs with no pool tables. And there are reasons why the pustule-covered Mickey will cook you chips, egg, and beans, or egg, chips, and beans, or beans, chips, eggs, and mushrooms but not, under any circumstances, chips, beans, eggs, and bacon. But you need to hang around for that kind of information. We'll get into that later. For now, suffice it to say this is Archie 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.

Related Characters: Samad Iqbal, Archibald (Archie) Jones

Related Themes:

Page Number: 153-154

Explanation and Analysis

O'Connell's Poolroom, run by Abdul-Mickey and frequented by Archie and Samad, is a place outside of history: it is where Samad and Archie can carry on traditions (gambling, drinking, arguing) that they have held for years, free from obligations of family or work. Nothing ever changes in O'Connell's, which acts as a safe haven and a refuge for Samad and Archie throughout the novel. Unlike the rest of London, where race and class are significant and highly divisive, O'Connell's is a space in which racial and class tensions are virtually non-existent, since all of the men who frequent the poolroom are on an equal playing field. They all come to O'Connell's for its eccentric traditions and for the space it offers for "fucking around." In O'Connell's, the men are not expected to be productive members of society, though ironically, they are expected to dedicate more energy to "time-wasting" and "lying-about" in O'Connell's than to their "blood relations." Though the bar is a highly masculine and somewhat exclusionary space—only at the end of the novel does it finally open up to women—it is also a positive outlet, since it offers the men a place for supportive friendship, free of the hierarchies that normally characterize relations in British society.

❝ If religion is the opiate off the people, tradition is an even more sinister analgesic, simply because it rarely appears sinister. If religion is a tight band, a throbbing vein, and a needle, tradition is a far homelier concoction: poppy seeds ground into tea; a sweet cocoa drink laced with cocaine; the kind of thing your grandmother might have made. To Samad, as to the people of Thailand, tradition was culture, and culture led to roots, and these were good, these were untainted principles. That didn't mean he could live by them, abide by them, or grow in the manner they demanded, but roots were roots and roots were good. You would get nowhere telling him that weeds too have tubers, or that the first sign of loose teeth is something rotten, something degenerate, deep within the gums.

Related Characters: Samad Iqbal

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

Samad believes that hanging onto Bangladeshi tradition is important, since it connects him to his roots: his family history and heritage, which he is extremely proud of (especially the story of his ancestor Mangal Pande). Though Samad finds it difficult to live up to all aspects of his culture—he drinks, gambles, and engages in an extramarital affair, all of which he considers Western vices—he sees tradition as valuable and "good," a source of stability and comfort. Yet, as the narrator notes, "weeds too have tubers," meaning that tradition can have negative consequences too. Samad's desire to maintain his ties to tradition leads him to separate his children by sending Millat to Bangladesh, which he believes will restore his family's ties to their culture. Though tradition seems relatively innocuous—"a sweet cocoa drink laced with cocaine"—maintaining a close relationship with tradition can be harmful, since Samad is unable to accept his own status as an immigrant with connections to different cultures. He is therefore unable to see that his children are products of both cultures, and that forcing them to live up to only Eastern traditions might

prove restrictive.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ And this is what Alsana really held against Samad, if you want the truth, more than the betrayal, more than the lies, more than the basic facts of a kidnap: that Magid should learn to hold his life lightly. Even though he was relatively safe up there in the Chittagong Hills, the highest point of that low-lying, flatland country, still she hated the thought that Magid should be as she had once been: holding on to a life no heavier than a paisa coin, wading thoughtlessly through floods, shuddering underneath the weight of black skies . . . Naturally, she became hysterical.

Related Characters: Samad Iqbal, Alsana Iqbal (née Begum)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

Though Samad believes that living in Bangladesh will help Millat develop into a better Muslim, reconnecting him to his cultural heritage, Alsana feels that Bangladesh is dangerous, since Magid will have to contend with natural disasters and hazardous conditions there—he will no longer take life for granted. Alsana knows that although she and Samad have struggled in England, they left their home country for a reason—to find stability and safety in another country. Though Magid survives Bangladesh, he is influenced by Western thinking about the country, viewing it as backward, undeveloped, and in need of British influence. His negative experiences in Bangladesh prompt him to turn back to Western society for solutions, and thus, Samad's plan—to convert Magid to Islam and to reconnect him to his Bangladeshi roots—fails. Moreover, Alsana and Samad's relationship is never quite the same after Magid's departure to Bangladesh, since Alsana realizes that Samad values tradition and religion over family and maintaining bonds with his sons. Nevertheless, the family sticks together, and by the end of the novel, they have tentatively reconciled, suggesting that family ties are deeply important and can be recovered when damaged.

❝ He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelled 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 he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshiped elephants and wore turbans; 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.

Related Characters: Millat Iqbal

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

Like Magid, Millat is ashamed of his "Paki" identity—the fact that he, as a brown person in British society, is an "other" and is therefore not accepted or even tolerated by white British people. Millat knows that he is the object of multiple negative stereotypes, and that he has little power or authority in British society (hence his obsession with gangster movies, which he believes might teach him to act more powerfully). Unlike Magid, however, who tries to assimilate into British society in order to be accepted, Millat renounces Western culture and turns toward KEVIN, a fundamentalist Islamic group that offers a space for other "Pakis" and Muslim Britons (like Mo Hussein-Ishmael, the butcher who experiences racially-motivated violence) to express their frustrations about the way they are treated. Nevertheless, Millat is deeply insecure about his own identity, and deeply conflicted about his own fondness for certain aspects of Western culture. Like Samad, he finds it difficult to give up certain Western vices.

Chapter 11 Quotes

It worked like this: someone (whoever had actually bought a pack of fags) lights up. Someone shouts "halves." At the halfway point the fag is passed over. As soon as it reaches the second person we hear "thirds," then "saves" (which is half a third), then "butt!," then, if the day is cold and the need for a fag overwhelming, "last toke!" But last toke is only for the desperate; it is beyond the perforation, beyond the brand name of the cigarette, beyond what could reasonably be described as the butt. Last toke is the yellowing fabric of the roach, containing the stuff that is less than tobacco, the stuff that collects in the lungs like a time bomb, destroys the immune system, and brings permanent, sniffling, nasal flu. The stuff that turns white teeth yellow.

Related Characters: Irie Ambrosia Jones , Millat Iqbal

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 242-243

Explanation and Analysis

Cigarettes are commonly shared among the students at Millat and Irie's school, Glenard Oak, since the children can't afford their own cigarettes. By sharing cigarettes, the students mingle, united by the common interest of smoking despite their differences—racial, class-related, or otherwise. The "last toke" described, which "turns white teeth yellow," seems to symbolize a lurking presence of harmful influences, recalling the theme of history and the past that is prominently featured in the novel. Problems from the past, like the "last toke," collect "like a time bomb," influencing events in the present and creating further problems. Similarly, the Iqbal and Jones families' secrets return to haunt them in the present, wreaking havoc on the families' lives—just as the "last toke" "destroys the immune system." "White teeth" seem to represent an idyllic, unsullied version of the present, whereas yellow teeth are more common: a present stained by tensions from the past.

All in all, then, the headmaster was wrong: Glenard could not be said to have passed on any great edifying beacon to future generations. A legacy is not something you can give or take by choice, and there are no certainties in the sticky business of inheritance. Much though it may have dismayed him, Glenard's influence turned out to be personal, not professional or educational: it ran through people's blood and the blood of their families; it ran through three generations of immigrants who could feel both abandoned and hungry even when in the bosom of their families in front of a mighty feast; and it even ran through Irie Jones of Jamaica's Bowden clan, though she didn't know it.

Related Characters: Irie Ambrosia Jones

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

Glenard Oak's headmaster believes that the school offers a "great edifying beacon" as a model of diversity and progressivism. Yet the school was founded by a plantation owner, Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, who originally used it as a workhouse for Jamaican immigrants—immigrants who were then abandoned when the workhouse failed. Though Glenard intended to educate Jamaicans and provide them with employment, he only succeeded in prompting generational trauma by contributing to the marginalization of Jamaican immigrants in London, whose descendants still feel the effects of "abandonment' and "hunger"—what their ancestors faced after Glenard's workhouse shut down. Once again, the past powerfully impacts the present, including Irie Jones's life: Glenard met her great-grandmother, Ambrosia Bowden, during the great earthquake in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1907. *White Teeth* weaves Britain's cultural and social history into the history of its citizens, showing that the political is always personal.

Chapter 12 Quotes

The Chalfens had no friends. They interacted mainly with the Chalfen extended family (the good genes that were so often referred to; two scientists, one mathematician, three psychiatrists, and a young cousin working for the Labour Party) [...] Bottom line: the Chalfens didn't need other people. They referred to themselves as nouns, verbs, and occasionally adjectives: It's the Chalfen way, And then he came out with a real Chalfenism, He's Chalfening again, We need to be a bit more Chalfenist about this. Joyce challenged anyone to show her a happier family, a more Chalfenist family than theirs.

Related Characters: Irie Ambrosia Jones , Joshua Chalfen, Millat Iqbal, Marcus Chalfen, Joyce Chalfen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

The Chalfens are a white, middle-class, and highly intellectual family whom Irie and Millat begin to visit after school as punishment for smoking weed with Joshua Chalfen, the oldest Chalfen son. The headmaster of Glenard Oak believes that the Chalfens might positively influence Millat and Irie, but the Chalfens—though impressive on paper—are prejudiced and insular. Both parents, Joyce and Marcus, have backward, simplistic views about non-white people, and they often make offensive comments to Irie and Millat without considering the children's feelings. The "Chalfenist" way is to prioritize logic, rationality, science, and intellectualism over emotion and sensitivity, and though Joyce thinks of their family as the "happiest" family, they are painfully oblivious to their own privilege and status, and the way that their class and race offer them certain advantages. Though the Jones and Iqbal families seem to be less impressive—they are not mathematicians, scientists, psychiatrists, and politicians—they are also connected to the world, and to other people, in a way that the Chalfens are not. Both the Jones and Iqbal children and parents maintain close relationships, and throughout the novel, they learn to be far less rigid in their worldviews. For example, Samad learns to accept his sons for their ties to both Eastern and Western culture, understanding that as immigrants, they are naturally influenced by both worlds.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ As the months flicked by. Ambrosia learned a lot of wonderful things from the handsome captain. He taught her how to read the trials of Job and study the warnings of Revelation, to swing a cricket bat, to sing "Jerusalem." How to add up a column of numbers. How to decline a Latin noun. How to kiss a man's ear until he wept like a child. But mostly he taught her that she was no longer a maidservant, that her education had elevated her, that in her heart she was a lady, though her daily chores remained unchanged. In here, in here, he liked to say, pointing to somewhere beneath her breastbone, the exact spot, in fact, where she routinely rested her broom. A maid no more. Ambrosia, a maid no more, he liked to say, enjoying the pun.

Related Characters: Captain Charlie Durham, Ambrosia Bowden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

After impregnating Hortense's mother, Ambrosia, Captain Charlie Durham, a British man living in Jamaica, offers to give Ambrosia lessons in typically British subjects: Latin, religious studies, cricket. Though Captain Durham promises that Ambrosia will be treated like a "lady"—not a maid—after her education, he leaves Jamaica before he can finish her lessons. Ambrosia's class status never changes, since as a black, colonial woman, she is still beneath Captain Durham: his are false promises. Similarly, British colonialism promised to lift up underdeveloped countries and their "primitive" people but did little to improve living conditions or elevate the status of colonized people. Captain Durham's actions reflect the failures and abuses of a system designed to impose British imperial power on supposedly "lesser" nations. His actions also resonate with future generations of Bowden women, since Hortense, Clara, and Irie all look for "saviors" to help them understand themselves and their own place in the world—God for Hortense, Archie for Clara, and Millat for Irie—just as Captain Durham acted as a "savior" for Ambrosia, purporting to help her achieve a higher status in society.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ O what a tangled web we weave. Millat was right: these parents were damaged people, missing hands, missing teeth. These parents were full of information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear. But [Irie] didn't want it anymore, she was tired of it. She was sick of never getting the whole truth. She was returning to sender.

Related Characters: Clara Bowden-Jones, Millat Iqbal, Irie Ambrosia Jones

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

After discovering that her mother's teeth are not real—they are false, since she had her real teeth knocked out during a scooter ride with Ryan Topps—Irie is disturbed and

unsettled, and she begins to realize that her parents have kept many secrets about their family history from her (including Archie's first marriage and Irie's dubious paternity). Irie decides to return to the home of her grandmother, Hortense ("returning to sender"), where she hopes to find out more about her complicated family tree and background: she wants to get to the bottom of the story, learning about the Bowden family's past and gaining an understanding of her own identity as a Bowden woman. Later in the novel, though, Irie will wish for a family without a complicated history, moving away from her fixation on the past. As a result, she refuses to learn the identity of her child's father (who might be Magid or Millat), attempting to create a new family without ties to a previous family history.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ Worst of all was the anger inside [Millat]. 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 run the clan, 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. Millat stubbed his fag out against the banister. 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 (five times a day without fail), fasting, working for the cause, spreading the message?

Related Characters: Marcus Chalfen, Magid Iqbal, Millat Iqbal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 369

Explanation and Analysis

Millat struggles to adhere to the "pious thoughts" encouraged by his fundamentalist Islamic group, KEVIN, since he is still motivated by the wholly Western notion of the "gangster": he wants to put on displays on violence and he hold power over others, though he knows that these desires are not compatible with Islam. Millat seems to be more interested in "winning the game" against Marcus Chalfen, Magid, and their brand of Western science (which KEVIN opposes) than in practicing religion for its own sake. Like Samad, who struggles with his desires to drink and masturbate, both of which are against Islamic beliefs, Millat tries to make compromises with his faith: Samad decides to stop masturbating so that he can start drinking, just as Millat believes that "clean living" might make up for his gangster-like desire for domination. Both Millat and Magid are torn among Western society, Islam, and Bangladeshi tradition, and Millat finds that he cannot rid himself of certain Western customs and cultural aspects, despite his attempts.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ Because Millat was here to finish it. To revenge it. To turn that history around. He liked to think he had a different attitude, a second-generation attitude. If Marcus Chalfen was going to write his name all over the world, Millat was going to write his BIGGER. There would be no misspelling his name in the history books. There'd be no forgetting the dates and times. Where Pande misfooted he would step sure. Where Pande chose A, Millat would choose B.

Related Characters: Marcus Chalfen, Millat Iqbal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 419

Explanation and Analysis

Though KEVIN decides to participate in a non-violent protest against Marcus Chalfen and the FutureMouse project, Millat decides to make an assassination attempt on Marcus Chalfen independently of the group. He does so because he is determined both to show his own power and to redeem his family history, acting in the way that Pande—who "misfooted" while attempting to fire the first shot of the Indian mutiny—was never able to. Millat wants to leave behind a powerful legacy, and he wants to be remembered as a true martyr, not a coward like Pande. Samad tells Millat that he is ashamed of having carved his name into Trafalgar Square when he first arrived in London, but Millat wants to write his name "BIGGER," proving himself to the world. He is no longer content to be an anonymous, stereotypical "Paki," though ultimately, he will "misfoot" just like Pande when Archie stops him from assassinating Chalfen.

Chapter 20 Quotes

Every moment happens twice: inside and outside, and they are two different histories. Archie does recognize the name, faintly, somewhere inside, but he is already twisting in his seat by then, trying to see if Samad is returning. He can't see Samad. Instead he spots Millat, who looks funny. Who looks decidedly funny. Peculiar rather than ha-ha. He's swaying ever so slightly in his seat, and Archie can't catch his eye for a you-all-right-mate look because his eyes are locked on to something and when Archie follows the path of this stare, he finds himself looking at the same peculiar thing: an old man weeping tiny tears of pride. Red tears. Tears Archie recognizes.

Related Characters: Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret (Dr. Sick), Samad Iqbal, Archibald (Archie) Jones

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 441

Explanation and Analysis

Archie realizes that Marcus Chalfen's mentor is Dr. Perret, a.k.a. "Dr. Sick," the Nazi doctor who he let escape at the end of World War II after deciding not to kill him, based on the outcome of a coin flip. Dr. Perret has recognizable "red tears," the product of a rare medical condition. Samad also realizes that Dr. Perret is alive, which means that Archie never killed him, though he claimed to Samad to have executed him. The narrator notes that "every moment happens twice"—indeed, at the end of the novel, Archie saves Dr. Perret for a second time, though this time he doesn't need a coin flip as motivation. Archie dives in front of Millat's bullet without a second thought; it seems as if he is obligated to repeat history, living out his life in cycles, since Dr. Perret is a war criminal and hardly deserves saving. Additionally, Dr. Perret's reappearance at the end of the novel, during the FutureMouse press conference, suggests that evil is a constant presence in society, across history—an inescapable part of both the past and the present.

Archie, for one, watched the mouse. He watched it stand very still for a second with a smug look as if it expected nothing less. He watched it scurry away, over his hand. He watched it dash along the table, and through the hands of those who wished to pin it down. He watched it leap off the end and disappear through an air vent. Go on my son! thought Archie.

Related Characters: Marcus Chalfen, Archibald (Archie) Jones

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 448

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, the FutureMouse is a symbol of oppression, since experiments are carried out on its body that are designed to allow scientists to explore the power of genetic engineering, which might be used to target certain human races (as in Dr. Perret's genetic experiments for the Nazis). By escaping at the end of the novel, though, the FutureMouse defies Marcus Chalfen's power, exercising free will and independence. Thus, the novel ends on a cautiously optimistic note, suggesting that freedom may be possible, though hard-won, for those who are oppressed. Indeed, the novel offers a peaceful conclusion for its characters, many of whom are people of color; though they have not drastically altered British society, they have found ways to be happy and to feel at ease with themselves and their identities.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

At 6:27 a.m. on January 1, 1975, in Cricklewood Broadway, Alfred Archibald Jones is lying facedown on the steering wheel of his Cavalier Musketeer Estate, having resigned himself to suicide. Archie feels that it is only proper that he should die on this unpleasant city street, living alone at the age of 47. From the car, he watches pigeons flying above and landing on Hussein-Ishmael, a halal butcher nearby, and considers that the pigeons have an "instinct for the Unlucky." They pass by Archie, however, since though he does not know it, luck is with him: "Somewhere, somehow, by somebody, it had been decided that he would live."

White Teeth begins with a scene that takes place in the middle of Archie Jones's personal history. Much of the rest of the novel concerns Archie's family life years later, but the novel nonetheless opens with this earlier scene. History, then, is a highly significant theme from the outset, since the novel promises to explain the full arc of Archie's life.

The Hussein-Ishmael is owned by Mo Hussein-Ishmael, a large man who despises the pigeons. On this morning, Mo is swearing loudly at the pigeons and "playing cricket"—trying to hit them with a bat. He calls Varin, his trainee, in to help. Mo believes that one day, Cricklewood and its residents will thank him for his "daily massacre" of the pigeons, since the town is covered in pigeon droppings. He spots Archie's car and asks Arshad, his son (and employee), to find out what's it doing in his driveway, blocking the way of his delivery trucks. Arshad returns to tell Mo that Archie has told him that he is "gassing himself." Mo storms out angrily, pushes down Archie's window, and tells him, "We're not licensed for suicides around here."

Though the novel begins with the perspective of a middle-aged white man, it quickly shifts to include a person of color—Mo Hussein-Ishmael—whose presence in Cricklewood suggests the multiethnic composition of the London neighborhood, immediately highlighting the importance of race and multiculturalism in the narrative.

Archie lifts his head off of the steering wheel as Mo yells at him. Suddenly, he has an epiphany, realizing suddenly that the world wants him to live after all. He begins to sob and thanks Mo profusely, then reverses his car and pulls away from the street. It is revealed that Archie attempted suicide because Ophelia, his wife—a "violet-eyed Italian with a faint mustache"—recently divorced him after thirty years of marriage. His marriage had felt like a pair of shoes that never fit, but are nonetheless worn "for the sake of appearances."

This passage suggests that Archie's life dramatically shifts after his divorce from Ophelia and his subsequent marriage to Clara Bowden, whom he meets at the end of the chapter. However, it is later made clear that Clara and Archie's marriage is as loveless and staid as Archie's previous marriage to Ophelia: history still repeats itself, even when it seems like everything is changing.

Archie met Ophelia Diagilo in a Florentine coffeehouse in the spring of 1946, after he "stumbled out of the darkness of war." She did not know that Archie can never maintain positive perceptions of women for long; deep down, he doesn't trust them, and he is only able to love women who "wear haloes." Ophelia also had a family history of mental illness, which she did not tell Archie about.

Archie's ingrained misogyny sheds light on the place of women in British society during this era. As an "everyman" character, Archie seems to stand for a generation of 20th-century British men who either mistrust women or valorize them for the wrong reasons—for their status as one-dimensional angels (who "wear haloes").

On Boxing Day, six days earlier, Archie went back to his and Ophelia's home in Hendon to collect his Hoover vacuum cleaner, encountering Ophelia's extended Italian family, who had come to help her. She had had a mental breakdown, and when Archie saw her, she was "curled up in a fetal ball on the sofa." One of Ophelia's relatives told Archie that the Hoover was broken, but he was determined to fix it. Yet Archie also began to feel that "The End was unavoidably nigh," and he flipped a coin to decide on his own suicide—"heads, life, tails, death."

Throughout the novel, Archie resorts to coin-flipping to help him make important decisions. This action becomes a motif, one of the myriad ways in which history repeats itself through individuals' acts: each and every time Archie flips the coin, the decision he makes based on the flip has unintended consequences.

However, Archie is neither a hero nor a martyr—the only people who can successfully commit suicide. Though the result of the coin flip ordered him to commit suicide, he ignores the omen and drives around aimlessly with the Hoover tube in his car (which he considers sticking down his throat in order to kill himself). On December 29, Archie meets with his old friend Samad Miah Iqbal, a Bengali Muslim with whom he fought "back when the fighting had to be done." After meeting at O'Connell's Poolroom, their new haunt, the men play poker "with only three hands"—since Samad's right hand is a "broken thing."

Samad and Archie's is a friendship that crosses cultural and racial boundaries. The two men are united on common ground—O'Connell's Poolroom, which becomes a recurring setting in the novel.

Samad tells Archie that marrying Alsana, his new wife, has given him "this new lease on living," since she is young and full of energy. Samad moved to England in the spring of 1973 with Alsana, who was then 23 (while Samad is middle-aged); he decided to move to the same borough as Archie, and the two rekindled their friendship. Samad tells Archie that he has not met the right woman yet, especially because Ophelia is mad: she believes that she is the "maid of the celebrated fifteenth-century art lover Cosimo de' Medici." Archie reflects that hindsight is always 20/20, but he later decides that he cannot take Samad's advice: on New Year's morning, he decides to commit suicide after all.

Samad seems to regard his wife as a prop for his own identity and development—she's meant to provide a benefit for him, a "new lease on living," rather than existing as a person in her own right. This remark again demonstrates the ingrained misogyny found in 20th-century British culture.

The story jumps forward to New Year's, as Archie's car is filling with carbon monoxide. He experiences a flashback of his life to date and deems it dull and depressing; he remembers fighting in the last year of World War II, looking for work on Fleet Street after the war and being told that experience as a soldier wouldn't be adequate for a job as a war correspondent, and ending up in a job at Morgan*Hero*, a printing firm on Euston Road that designs folded materials (envelopes and leaflets). This job is not much of an achievement, but Archie reflects that "you'll find things need folds, they need to overlap, otherwise life would be like a broadsheet: flapping in the wind and down the street so you lose the important sections."

Once again, the theme of history proves significant: Archie is fixated on his own past, and obsessed with the ways in which his life has gone wrong. Archie's reflection that things "need to overlap" in life speaks to another prominent aspect of the novel: the entangled, interconnected relationships that form between its characters.


Archie was once a competitive track cyclist, and in 1948, he participated in the Olympics in London, sharing 13th place with a Swedish gynecologist named Horst Ibelgaufts. Because of an error, Archie's name was omitted from Olympic records, but Horst continues to write Archie, sending cheerful messages from Sweden about his family and his newfound hobbies (such as playing the harp). After their race in 1948, Horst and Archie got drunk and hired prostitutes in London, one of whom Horst slept with in front of Archie. Archie remembers the prostitute he hired, Daria, and before he blacks out, he thinks of the smile he saw on her face: "if there was any chance of ever seeing a look like that again, then he wanted the second chance." After leaving Mo's driveway, Archie is ecstatic, speeding through street signs and choosing new routes he has never taken before.

Archie's personal history continues to hold sway over the present as he reminisces about his friendship with Horst and his experiences with the prostitute Daria during the 1948 Olympics. Thinking back on the past—and the way that he felt in his memories—motivates him to pursue a "second chance" in his life. This passage also includes another example of a woman who, from a man's perspective, exists only to serve his goals: just as Alsana revives Samad's enthusiasm for life, here the memory of Daria gives Archie new energy.


The story changes to the perspective of Tim Westleigh, more commonly known as Merlin, who wakes up on the kitchen floor to his doorbell ringing. At the door, he greets a "middle-aged man dressed head-to-toe in gray corduroy." Merlin asks if he is a traveling salesman or a missionary, and Archie tells him that he saw Merlin's sign while driving by: a white bedsheet with rainbow lettering reading WELCOME TO THE "END OF THE WORLD" PARTY, 1975. Archie joins a table where "two black guys, a topless Chinese girl, and a white woman wearing a toga" are playing rummy. After many drinks, Archie feels intimately acquainted with the people he has just met, though they quickly fall into an argument about World War II that puts a damper on things. Archie wonders if he is the type of man who, far from being a hero or the center of attention, is "just there to make up the numbers."

The "End of the World" party represents a multicultural London, with its diverse cast of characters—radically different from the homogeneous world Archie has known before. As a result, Archie does not feel like part of the group: his age and personal history set him apart from this contemporary world.

Yet something is destined to happen that will transform Archie: his encounter with Clara Bowden, a woman "beautiful in all senses except, maybe, by virtue of being black." She comes striding down the stairs toward Archie, who regards her as "the most comforting woman he had ever met," one who wears her sexuality "with an older woman's ease." She speaks to Archie is a lilting Caribbean accent, and he sees that she has no top **teeth.** Archie tells her that he nearly died today, and Clara solemnly tells him that "dis life no easy!" Suddenly, Archie sees a look on her face identical to the one he saw in Daria's. Six weeks later the two marry: Clara is 19, and Archie is 47.

Clara represents a new kind of woman to Archie: independent, bold, and self-assured (unlike the mentally incapacitated Ophelia). Yet her blackness is also striking, and clearly marks her as different, even in diverse London. The narrator notes that Clara is beautiful "except" for "being black," which also points at the racist standards of beauty that will become more prominent later in the novel.


CHAPTER 2

The story shifts to Clara Bowden's narrative, specifically the story of Clara and Ryan Topps, who is essential to understanding why she married Archie. Ryan is lanky and redheaded; he drives a green Vespa and has few friends. Clara sees Ryan (with whom she attended St. Jude's Community School in Lambeth) as a kindred spirit, even though other girls at the school find him off-putting. But Clara, too, is unpopular, since her mother forces her to try and convert her schoolmates to the church of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Clara feels that she is somehow "going to save the heathen Ryan Topps."

Clara's transformation is described in this chapter, which shows her transition from a timid, religious young woman to a rebellious, independent one—egged on by Ryan Topps, who, ironically, becomes less rebellious (eventually becoming a Jehovah's Witness).

Hortense, Clara's mother, tells her that not everyone can be saved, and asks Darcus, Clara's father, if he agrees. He is an "odiferous, moribund, salivating old man" who seems unable to move from his armchair since a "mysterious illness" debilitated him upon his arrival in England from Jamaica 14 years before. Hortense eventually arrived with a 16-year-old Clara and gave Darcus "the tongue-lashing of his life"; ever since, he has been essentially mute. Meanwhile, Hortense is preparing for the End of the World—January 1, 1975, which Jehovah's Witnesses believe marks the apocalypse. Hortense was disappointed that the previous "end of the world" date, in 1925, did not result in Armageddon. She believes that Clara must help out in the Witnesses' effort to warn the world about the "end times," since Clara is a "miracle baby" (Hortense had her when she was 48). Hortense, too, was a miracle baby, born in the middle of an earthquake in 1907.

Clara's family life is challenging, since her mother is overbearing and pious, while her father is vacant and unhelpful. Though Clara hopes to escape her family, she is ultimately unable to escape all family ties: Clara and Hortense become estranged, but later in the novel, Hortense becomes close with Clara's daughter, Irie.

On a Sunday morning, Clara is sent out with the youth group of the Lambeth Kingdom Hall (the Jehovah's Witnesses congregation) to go "doorstepping" (going door-to-door to convert people). Coincidentally, she encounters Ryan Topps at one of the doors, and nervously asks if he is interested "in de teachins of d'Lord." Ryan recognizes her as a schoolmate and invites her in; they have sex, and by Monday, Clara and Ryan are "dealing" with each other—or dating. Clara quickly realizes that Ryan wants a girlfriend who admires him and his scooter, but she doesn't seem to mind: "the object of her passion," Ryan, is "only an accessory to the passion itself." Over the next few months, Clara's mind, clothes, walk, and "soul" change, and she meets Ryan's friends, a group of "Hippies, Flakes, Freaks, and Funky Folk" who smoke joints together in North London squats.

Ryan is an inadequate, disappointing boyfriend, but he introduces Clara to a new world—one filled with "hippies" and "funky folk," drugs, and sex. Exposed to new sorts of experiences, Clara develops into a different person, liberated from her pious upbringing: Ryan is only "an accessory" to her "passion" for this new lifestyle, suggesting her growing sense of her own independence.

Clara begins to feel disillusioned with the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and she wonders about all the people who won't be saved when the world ends: she stops going to church and passing out church literature. One day, Clara has detention and misses her four o'clock meeting with Ryan. When she returns home, she finds him eating with Hortense, cheerfully chatting; soon, Ryan and Hortense are spending more time together than Ryan and Clara, and Ryan quickly becomes religious, egged on by Hortense. Clara realizes that "Hortense and Ryan were now trying to save *her*."

Clara is horrified to learn that Ryan has usurped her place in her own family, since he becomes a Jehovah's Witness at Hortense's urging. Clara's own desire to explore the world and rebel puts her at odds with her strict family—just as characters such as Millat and Magid Iqbal and Joshua Chalfen will later rebel against their own families.

Ryan and Clara go on a scooter ride across London and up to Hampstead Heath, where he tells Clara that he and Hortense are concerned about her: she is dressing "like a whore," and smoking weed is evil. Ryan says that there is still time for Clara to be saved, but Clara says she'd rather be "sizzling in de rains of sulfur wid my friends than sittin' in heaven, bored to tears." The scooter crashes into an oak tree, and Clara's top **teeth** get knocked out of her mouth. Ryan escapes without a scratch, believing that God has chosen him "as one the saved"—and Clara as one of the unsaved.

Even as Ryan tries to assert control over Clara, bringing her back to the religion she once followed, she refuses to play along, boldly asserting her own independence.

On New Year's, Clara goes to Merlin's End of the World party, but she feels melancholy throughout the night: she still longs for a savior, a man who can take her away from her dreary life in Lambeth. When Clara sees Archie at the party, then, she sees him as more than just a chubby middle-aged white man; instead, she sees him as "the last man on earth," her savior.

Though Clara wishes to be free of her family, she is also worried about her own place in the world without the stability of traditional family structures, and as a result, she decides to marry Archie Jones (despite his clear mediocrity); she sees him as a "savior" who can provide her with a definite role in patriarchal society—his wife.

CHAPTER 3

By February 1975, Clara has abandoned the church for Archie Jones, but she is not yet a "carefree atheist": Hortense has ostracized her because of the affair, and Clara realizes that she must get married (since her mother "would prefer her to marry an unsuitable man rather than live with him in sin"). Clara and Archie move into a two-story house in Willesden Green, a suburban neighborhood that Clara finds disappointing. She realizes that though Archie has some good qualities, "romance was beyond him, passion, unthinkable." Archie is a good man, but a dull one; Clara did not notice his physical deficits at their wedding, but now she notices his age.

Clara is disappointed in Archie, who is hardly romantic as a husband, but resigns herself to a life of suburban stability. She realizes that it is better than the alternative—living a strict, regulated, and pious life with Hortense, or fending for herself as a single black woman.

The two married on February 14, Archie in a mohair suit and Clara in a long brown woolen dress and a set of false **teeth**. Samad and Alsana are their witnesses and the only attendants: all other friends and relatives declined the invitation, and only Horst Ibelgaufts sent a congratulatory letter. Back in the present, Archie and Clara are struggling to move furniture into their house and arguing; Clara realizes that Archie can never decide what he wants, which is why he reverts to flipping coins to make decisions.

Archie and Clara's disappointing wedding corresponds to their disappointing, mismatched relationship: whereas Clara is strong and opinionated, Archie is weak-willed and indecisive.

Clara asks Archie if he thinks that Samad and Alsana, who are coming for dinner, will want her to cook Indian curry, but Archie says that "they're not *those* kind of Indians." In fact, the two are Bangladeshi, and they, too, have just moved to Willesden, after saving up money: Alsana sews for an edgy clothing store called Domination, and Samad is a waiter at a curry house run by his distant cousin, Ardashir Mukhul. Samad splits his tips with the other waiters, including the good-looking Shiva, who is adept at flirting with customers. Shiva becomes enraged when he has to give up his tips, and he makes fun of Samad, calling him a "sad little man." Samad is desperately unhappy, and he wishes that while working, he could wear a sign explaining that he is intelligent and has had impressive careers in the past.

Clara's comment to Archie and Archie's response suggest a clear cultural and ethnic divide: Clara and Archie have a simplistic view of what it means to be Indian, speaking to larger issues of racism and racial misunderstanding—especially since Samad and Alsana aren't even Indian. Such ingrained racism has forced Samad into marginal employment in London. Though he is educated, well-spoken, and attractive, as a brown person, he is not afforded the same opportunities that white, native British people are—like Archie, who has a comfortable office job.

Samad asks Ardashir for a raise, since he needs money to finance his move to North London, where he and Alsana—who is pregnant—hope to raise their family. Samad had assumed that living with Alsana would be easy, but she is often angry, which Samad thinks is "the new way with these women." That night, Alsana rages at Samad, complaining that her child will grow up around Clara and Archie's "half-blacky white" children, and that they cannot afford to eat after moving to a more expensive neighborhood.

The novel consistently shows its characters behaving in ways that seem culturally insensitive—for example, Alsana' complains about "half-black white" children—suggesting that even those people who are targeted for their race, like Alsana, are not immune to racist rhetoric.

Alsana puts on her coat and leaves the house. She reflects that the neighborhood, though expensive, is a nice area—unlike Whitechapel, where they lived before ("where that madman E-knock someoneoranother gave a speech that forced them into the basement while kids broke the windows with their steel-capped boots"). In comparison, Willesden is markedly more liberal and diverse. Alsana visits her niece, Neena, who works at the cobbler and whom Alsana calls "Niece-of-Shame."

Alsana is referring to the real-life figure Enoch Powell, an infamous conservative British politician who caused riots in London after criticizing immigration to the United Kingdom in his "Rivers of Blood" speech. The novel shows larger issues and tensions involving race and British culture being absorbed by the characters and directly impacting their lives.

After leaving the cobbler, Alsana runs into Clara, who is sitting in the back of the white van she and Archie are using to move into their house. Clara is quickly losing her Jamaican accent, and she greets Alsana cheerfully. The two begin to talk, and Clara expresses surprise when Alsana tells her that she is pregnant: the two "girl-wives" realize that while their husbands even though their husbands tell each other everything, they still keep things from the wives themselves.

Alsana and Clara realize that because they are women, they are not able to know all the same things their husbands do—that they are not trusted by men, despite their status as wives and mothers, because of their inferior place in society.

CHAPTER 4

Clara tells Archie that she is two-and-a-half months pregnant while he is at work, and he feels ecstatic. He goes out to get some Indian sweets and brings them back to the office to celebrate, though Noel, his coworker, feels uncomfortable: "despite being in the direct-mail business, Noel hated to be spoken to directly." Maureen, the receptionist, is friendlier, though both she and Noel are somewhat repulsed by the Indian sweets. Maureen reflects that Archie is "always talking to Pakistanis and Caribbeans like he didn't even notice," and that she was shocked when he showed up to an office dinner with a black woman as his date.

Maureen's attitude toward Archie and Clara demonstrates her own racist mentality: she is shocked that he doesn't treat non-white people differently, suggesting that 20th-century British society is characterized by deep racial divisions and ingrained prejudice. Maureen and Noel's dislike of the Indian sweet also underscores this tendency to reject anything that comes from an unfamiliar culture.

Kelvin Hero, Archie's boss, asks to see him in his office, where he tells him that the company dinner—which Archie brought Clara to—was uncomfortable and "unpleasant." Kelvin says that he is not a "racialist," but that Archie's "attitude is a little strange": Clara is beautiful, but the men in the company "don't like to think they're wanting a bit of the other when they're sitting down to a company dinner with their lady wives," especially because Clara is black. Kelvin gives Archie a wad of Luncheon Vouchers, and as Archie is on his way out, he says that Archie wasn't selected to go to the next company dinner.

Kelvin bribes an unsuspecting Archie with Luncheon Vouchers to distract him from the fact that he no longer wants Archie to attend company dinners with his black wife, again demonstrating the extent to which racial divisions and racism run rampant in British society. Notably, Archie doesn't speak up; even though he's comfortable with Clara, he's also complicit in upholding racist norms.

Clara and Alsana start to see more of each other, meeting for lunch in Kilburn Park, often with Neena. On one occasion, Alsana tells Clara and Neena that she is having twins; the three women discuss baby names, and Alsana tells Clara that she should let Archie choose the name he wants. Neena mocks Alsana for being a "submissive Indian woman," but Alsana insists that keeping quiet is the best way to go about family life. Alsana adds that Neena's generation can't understand that "not everybody wants to see into everybody else's sweaty, secret parts." She says that she liked Samad well enough when they first met, but the more she learns about him, the less she likes him.

Clara, Neena, and Alsana's conversations illuminate the complex role of women in contemporary British society. While Neena is assertive and independent, Alsana is resigned to passivity, taking for granted the idea that she will never be able to communicate well with her husband.

Neena says that it's a shame that Alsana and Clara are going to have boys, since "men have caused enough chaos this century": she says that if she knew she was going to have a boy, she would have to "seriously consider abortion." Sol Jozefowicz, the unofficial park keeper, walks by during their conversation, and Alsana, offended by Neena's comments, asks if "the murder of innocents" is funny. Sol replies that in his experience, it isn't funny, and all three women suddenly realizes that the ex-park keeper may have history of his own having to do with "the murder of innocents."

History intrudes forcefully on the women's lighthearted conversation, since it is implied that Sol Jozefowicz is a Holocaust survivor—an unpleasant notion that disrupts the women's discussion in the present, serving as a reminder that history is always lingering close by.

Alsana says that she does not have time to worry about the truth: she has to worry about the truth that can be "lived with." She believes that because she and Clara have married older men, their children "will always have daddy-long-legs for fathers," "one leg in the present, one in the past." Alsana also says that Samad and Archie were not war heroes, only mediocre men, and Clara agrees. When looked at "close up," the two are dull and pathetic, with boring and unimportant jobs.

Alsana believes that Archie and Samad are fixated on the past because their lives in the present are deeply unsatisfying: again, the novel makes the argument that history holds sway over the present for its characters (often in a deeply negative way).

CHAPTER 5

Per Alsana's "instruction" to "look at the thing close up"—the narrator takes the story back to Archie and Samad's wartime experiences. The two traveled in a five-man Churchill (a kind of tank) through Athens to Thessaloniki in Greece, accompanied by Roy Mackintosh, Will Johnson, and Thomas Dickinson-Smith, their fellow soldiers. Dickinson-Smith is a repressed homosexual who desires Samad, while Roy despises Samad for his "poncey-radio-operator-ways," mocking him by calling him "Sultan." Samad says that the term isn't historically or geographically accurate, since he is from Bengal.

The novel plunges back in time to examine younger versions of Archie and Samad, suggesting that by looking at the past, Archie and Samad's lives in the present can be better understood. It's already clear, however, that Samad still faced just as much senseless racism in this very different context.


Archie's brigade was meant to provide service across the army and from country to country—not to fight the war but to ensure that the war "ran smoothly," and that roads of communication were communicable. Samad tells the other soldiers that he is educated and trained, and that he should be an officer, not a low-level soldier; his great-grandfather Mangal Pande was the "great hero of the Indian Mutiny," a man who shot the "first hateful pigfat-smeared bullet." Samad says that now India is full of idiots, and laments that his hand was crippled by a misfired shot in the trenches; since he is disabled, he has ended up in an uncelebrated part of the army that just builds bridges. Roy calls the brigade "the Buggered Battalion," led by Dickinson-Smith, who has resigned himself to his own fate—to die in battle, like his other male relatives.

Throughout the novel, Samad fixates on the story of Mangal Pande, whose supposedly heroic legacy he hopes to live up to—he wishes to repeat the past in the present. Yet Pande's legacy is disputed: it is not entirely clear whether he was the martyr Samad wants him to be, though Samad, whose actions in the war are not heroic, is very attached to the glorified version of Pande's story.

The soldiers swap tragic tales about their life: they are a "traveling circus of discontents roaming aimlessly through Eastern Europe." On May 6, 1945, something in the tank blows up while the brigade is stationed in a town in Bulgaria. Samad and Archie go into town to seek assistance, and when they return, they find Roy, Will Johnson, and Thomas Dickinson-Smith dead; Dickinson-Smith seems to have killed himself before his attacker could. Since Archie and Samad are isolated in Bulgaria, they don't know that the war has already ended. Samad tries to fix the destroyed tank radio, and Archie attempts to help: the two gradually become better friends.

Samad and Archie are forced to develop a friendship, despite their clear differences: Archie, a white man, has never encountered someone from Bangladesh before. The friendship between the two men persists throughout the novel, demonstrating that racial differences are not always divisive.

Samad and Archie interact with some of the town's children, and they discover that one of them has dollar bills. The boy says that he got them from a man called "Dr. Sick," who lives in a derelict house in the town. Archie and Samad settle into a routine, eating dinner in the old man Gozan's kitchen-café every evening; they make a pretense of looking for the killers but soon abandon the mission, deciding to smoke cigarettes and chat outside instead. Their friendship "crosses class and color": it is "the kind of friendship an Englishman makes on holiday, that he can only make on holiday." Samad and Archie discuss women, and Samad admits that the woman he will marry—who will eventually turn out to be Alsana—is not yet born. Samad decides to "cement his friendship" with Archie by telling him the epic story of Mangal Pande, his relative. Samad implores Archie to "hold his judgment" if, when he returns to Britain, he hears someone speak of the East.

Again, the novel comments on racial divisions in British society. Samad and Archie develop the "kind of friendship an Englishman makes on holiday" because it is only on vacation—outside of England and the confines of his own familiar world—that an Englishman might be exposed to different cultures. This point suggests that England is in many ways xenophobic and confining, and that English people are prone to thinking of the East in simplistic ways: Samad argues that eastern countries are far more diverse and complex than English society believes them to be.

Samad has started taking morphine left in an abandoned church-turned-hospital in the town, and as he gets high, he reflects on the words left on the church by dissenters who were unwilling to pay a burial tax during a cholera epidemic. These people were locked in the church by a corrupt landlord and left to die. He feels a kinship with these "dead dissenters." Archie says that if he knew he were going to die, he would spend his last hours "making love to a lady." Samad tells Archie that they are "creatures of consequence," and that their children will be born of their actions. He also tells Archie that he considers him his friend, and that they will meet and have dinner together in the year 1975.

Samad's fixation with history is made clear: he is obsessed with stories from the past, including the story of the dissenters in the church, and he believes strongly in the power of legacy. He also predicts—accurately—that the future will be influenced by the past when he tells Archie that they will remain friends after the war and that their actions will shape their children's lives.

In the morning, Samad and Archie are awakened by celebrating Russian soldiers: the war has been over for two weeks. Samad feels furious, since he thought he would have a glorious return to Bangladesh, but he hasn't accomplished anything in the war. Archie speaks with one of the Russian soldiers, who are on their way to Poland to liberate the work camps; they have stopped in Bulgaria to catch a Nazi hiding in the town named Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret. Perret is a Frenchman who helped the Nazis with their sterilization program and euthanasia policy—he's also known as Dr. Sick to the town children. Archie, who is wearing Dickinson-Smith's uniform, is mistaken for a captain, and the Russian soldier asks him if he would like to lead the expedition to hunt down the doctor. Archie is hesitant, but Samad—also disguised as a captain—agrees.

Samad believes that capturing Dr. Perret will allow him to live up to the apparently heroic wartime legacy of his famous relative, Mangal Pande—thus repeating history and continuing the traditions of the past that he holds dear. Ultimately, though, it is Archie who is tasked with killing Dr. Perret, suggesting that Samad will inadvertently find himself aligned with the other version of Pande's narrative, in which Pande fails to act heroically. The way Samad's desires are thwarted shows how difficult it can be to shape the course of history, even when one is actively trying to do so.

Though Samad is excited to lead the charge on Dr. Perret, Archie is frightened: he has never had a hero, and Samad is the closest thing to one he has ever experienced—though Samad is also a "raving lunatic," high on morphine and screaming instructions to the drunken Russian soldiers. Later, Archie finds Samad sitting by himself in the dark, upset: he is coming down from a particularly "luscious, eloquent" high, and he believes that with his crippled hand and lack of wartime achievements, he is no longer the man he used to be. Samad tells Archie that he is "fit for nothing now," and that he doesn't know what he is going to do after the war. He wonders if he and Archie are effectively deserters—"hiding in a church while the world was falling apart around our ears." Samad puts his gun into his mouth, and Archie tries to talk him down, telling him that by hunting the Nazi doctor, he has a chance to redeem himself.

Samad nearly gives in to an irrational impulse here, which again aligns him with the version of the Pande narrative in which Pande is described as foolhardy and ineffective. It seems that by fixating on recreating the past, Samad runs the risk of inadvertently living out its negative aspects rather than its positive ones.

The men enter the house on the outskirts of town where Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret lives, and they find a pale, thin man around 25 years old, surrounded by paintings. He has blood-tinged tears rolling down his face, which he tells Samad are the result of "diabetic retinopathy." The soldiers tell Dr. Sick that he will be brought to Poland to stand trial, and they march him out of the house. Later, they leave the doctor handcuffed to their jeep and go to the town café to drink and play poker. Samad wins easily, and he asks Nikolai Pesotsky, the Russian soldier, to give him Dr. Sick in exchange for all of the things the men have gambled and Samad has won. Nikolai gives Samad the keys to the jeep.

Dr. Perret is a recurring character who, by appearing both in this flashback and in contemporary scenes in the novel, represents the way in which evil—specifically the evil of racism, since Perret's genetic experiments for the Nazis are designed to eliminate non-Aryan races—is not only a part of history but also a part of the present.

Archie goes with Samad, insisting that they will dump Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret at the first barracks they come across, but Samad wants to kill the doctor. He says that the doctor, a eugenicist, "wants to control; to dictate the future," but that a "race of indestructible men" is only possible through "faith." Samad is not particularly religious, but he seizes on religion as a reason to punish Dr. Sick, and he tells Archie that it is his destiny to kill the Nazi. Samad taunts Archie, telling him that he doesn't "stand for anything." In response, Archie wrenches the doctor out of the car, and Samad hears a shot ring out a few minutes later. Archie returns to the car bleeding and limping, his face "lit up like a big baby, entering life head first."

Though it seems as if Archie decides to act on Samad's advice—by killing Dr. Perret—it is later revealed that he spared the doctor's life, and that the doctor shot him in retaliation. Archie's crucial decision controls the outcome of the novel, since Dr. Perret plays a major role in the narrative's conclusion. Samad's criticism of the doctor for wanting to "dictate the future" thus becomes somewhat ironic; by egging Archie on, Samad is really the one who controls the future—just not in ways that he intends.

CHAPTER 6

Samad has "caught children like a disease": after 40-odd years, he has finally had children and is surrounded by them, including other people's children and his children's friends. In July 1984, he has found himself in the position of parent-governor, involved in the parents' association at his children's school. At one meeting of the governors, Samad is particularly belligerent, criticizing the school for putting on a "Harvest Festival" instead of a Muslim event. Afterward, the music teacher Poppy Burt-Jones approaches him and tells him that she thinks he made a good point about the festival; she mentions that she is interested in Indian culture, and Samad corrects her gently, saying that he isn't actually from India. As Poppy compliments his children—remarking that it is unusual for Indian children to be loud instead of subdued—Samad realizes that he is enormously attracted to Poppy.

Samad's attraction to his children's teacher, Poppy Burt-Jones, is a source of great frustration for him, since he is becoming increasingly critical of Western culture (signified by his criticism of the Harvest Festival)—yet he nonetheless desires a white woman. This attraction demonstrates his ambivalent relationship with British society as an immigrant and a person of color, particularly since Poppy herself displays the same kind of racist ignorance that book's other white characters do.

In 1976, just after his marriage to Alsana—which he found deeply unsatisfying, sexually—Samad asked an elderly Alim (a scholar of Islamic law) in the mosque in Croydon if a man would be permitted to masturbate. He was told that masturbating is against Islam teachings: "stay away from your right hand." Instead, Samad decided to masturbate with his left hand, which he does every day after returning from the restaurant at three in the morning. On January 1, 1980, Samad decided to give up masturbating so that he could drink—a "business proposition" with God. But after he sees Poppy Burt-Jones in July of 1984, he begins to believe that "temptation ha[s] been deliberately and maliciously thrown in his path." He begins to masturbate again, and he also fasts, hoping to "purge himself of the sights and smells of Poppy Burt-Jones."

Samad's complicated relationship with his own sexuality and faith again speaks to his complicated relationship with Western society. He finds himself caught between Western vices—masturbation, extramarital sex, drinking—and his own Muslim heritage and beliefs, eventually resorting to loopholes in Muslim practices. Samad's struggle to resolve these particular tensions indicates how difficult it is for immigrants more generally (especially those from subjugated and misunderstood racial and ethnic groups) to exist comfortably in England.

Though Samad might be a bad Muslim, he is a great waiter: back in the present of 1984, he excels at the restaurant, and he now orders Shiva (who has grown older and is less attractive) around. Shiva asks Samad if something is wrong with him, and Samad says that he is troubled by a woman who isn't his wife; he rants about the immorality and debauchery of London culture, and Shiva tries to talk him down. Shiva tells Samad that men like them should never fall for an English woman, since their countries have "too much bloody history."

Shiva's remarks—about "too much bloody history" between England and the East—highlight the lasting impact of imperialism. England colonized India and Bangladesh, and as immigrants to England from these areas, Shiva and Samad continue to experience the effects of this difficult history, which complicates their relationship with English society and English people.

Samad takes his son Millat to school one morning in order to run into Poppy Burt-Jones, and he becomes frustrated with his misbehaving children. They pick up Millat's twin Magid and Irie Jones, who is "not a pretty child": she has her "genes mixed up, Archie's nose with Clara's awful buck**teeth**." Irie and Magid are wearing black with white armbands painted with vegetable baskets, and they both refuse to speak out of protest: Irie writes on a notepad that they are protesting about the Harvest Festival. Samad recalls that Magid told his friends that his name was "Mark Smith": Magid desperately wants to be in another family, and he wants to fit in with his peers, which disappoints Samad, who wants him to be religious.

In contrast to Samad, who tries to separate himself from British society (though he often struggles to), the younger generation of characters in the novel hope to assimilate into Western culture: they support the Harvest Festival, which Samad rejects (arguing that Muslim holidays should be celebrated instead), and Magid is openly embarrassed by his own family and his non-British name.

At school, Samad watches Poppy Burt-Jones conducting the children's orchestra, and Poppy introduces him as a visitor; she says that the orchestra will be experimenting with Indian music in his honor. In response, the children mock Indian music. Poppy reprimands her class for being culturally insensitive, and she asks Millat what sort of music he listens to at home: Millat tells her that he listens to Springsteen and Michael Jackson.

Though intended to flatter Samad and demonstrate her cultural awareness, Poppy's comments miss the mark: Samad is Bangladeshi, not Indian, though she associates him with Indian culture, and she assumes wrongly that Millat listens to Indian music at home. Poppy fails to see past simplistic cultural stereotypes, and she does not seem to understand that Millat has grown up with both Western and Eastern influences—and that he is not merely one-dimensional, neatly reducible to one category: "Indian."

Samad follows Poppy into her office after the music lesson. He realizes that she is acting nervously around him; he feels aroused, but unable to leave. Poppy tells Samad that she has "so much admiration for the sense your people have of abstinence, of *self-restraint*." Suddenly, Samad kisses her.

The chapter ends with a striking moment of irony related to racial and culture differences. Just as Poppy wrongly assumes that Millat listens exclusively to Indian music, she does not seem to realize that Samad is not a simplistic cultural stereotype, either—he is not "restrained" or "abstinent" in the way she expects people from his cultural background to be, as evidenced by his impulsively kissing her.

CHAPTER 7

Two weeks later, Samad is packing the one shirt he's never worn to mosque into a plastic bag, so that he can change later and meet Poppy illicitly (without desecrating clothes he wears while worshipping). Magid and Millat are packing food into rucksacks to meet Irie and visit an old man they have been assigned to offer charity to for the Harvest Festival. The narrator notes that both journeys are "rerun[s]." Immigrants have always been "prone to repetition," and in London, the Iqbals are reenacting "the dash they made from one land to another," since Magid, Millat, and Samad are all dashing away from their Muslim heritage and beliefs.

The narrator directly connects Samad, Millat, and Magid's trajectories: despite their surface-level dissimilarities, all three Iqbal men are influenced by Western culture, and by the history of immigration—which they will all continue to reproduce in different ways as the story goes on.

On the bus, Millat, Magid, and Irie loudly discuss the food they are bringing to the old man. An old age pensioner comments to another man that they—the children—should go back to their own country. Meanwhile, Samad is on his way to meet Poppy in Harlesden, which he agreed to after kissing her in her office two weeks before. He changes in a McDonald's bathroom and visits his cousin's wife Zinat's shop, to provide himself with an alibi; Zinat is a notorious gossip, and Samad tells her that he is going to Park Royal to discuss a life insurance plan, knowing that she will report back to Alsana. Samad brings Poppy a coconut, which he says is "brown and old on the outside, white and fresh on the inside."

Samad's comment about the coconut suggests that he is trying to make himself seem acceptable to Poppy, a white woman, though he is not her race or age—he equates whiteness with being "fresh," as opposed to his exterior, which is "brown and old."He seems to have absorbed the kind of racist rhetoric that also plagues Millat, Magid, and Irie here, who are told to "go back to their own country" even though all three were born in England.

The old man the children are visiting, Mr. J. P. Hamilton, is surprised to find them on his doorstep. He is a distinguished, well-dressed man with a signet ring and four argent medals, and he speaks in a voice that "even the children sensed was from a different class, a different era." Mr. Hamilton closes the door on the children, but Millat rings the doorbell again; the old man lets them into his home reluctantly and inspects the groceries they have left, which he deems "too hard" for him to eat (he has only false **teeth**). Mr. Hamilton instructs the children to take better care of their teeth than he did, though he notes that when he was in the Congo, "the only way [he] could identify a nigger was by the whiteness of his teeth." The children are horrified by his racist remarks, but Mr. Hamilton presses on, talking about "third molars"—wisdom teeth, inherited through the father's line. The children leave in the middle of his rambling.

Mr. J. P. Hamilton's use of racist slur here makes reference to the novel's title, suggesting that "white teeth" are a feature that mark out black and brown people as distinct and vulnerable. Indeed, Irie, Magid, and Millat are targeted for their ethnicities throughout the novel: they are bullied and called racist names, and they experience severe insecurities because of their different status in British society. The mention of wisdom teeth being passed down by fathers also hints at the way vulnerability and difference often persist through generations.

In Willesden, the children frequently encounter "the Mad": crazy street people, the kind of people Londoners have learned not to look at for fear of direct interaction. Samad and Poppy Burt-Jones encounter "Mad Mary," a "black voodoo woman with a red face"; Samad tells Poppy not to look at her, since she is dangerous and "doesn't like white people." Mad Mary screams at them, and Samad is struck by the thought that she is looking at him "with recognition": she has identified him as a "fellow traveler," a fellow madman. Samad touches Mad Mary lightly on her shoulder, trying to pacify her, and she moves away from them. Poppy compliments him for how calm he is, and Samad says that it runs in his family, thinking of Mangal Pande.

Samad recognizes a kind of familiar spirit in Mad Mary: they are both "travelers," tormented by their outsider status in society (both are people of color). Thus, Mad Mary seems to trust Samad, sensing similarities between them. While Samad is not outwardly "mad" in the way that Mary is, he is similarly disoriented and lost, conflicted by his status as an immigrant attempting to understand his place in an adopted society. What's more, Poppy's reaction indicates that it's crucial for Samad to avoid showing this conflict in the way that Mad Mary does; appearing to stay calm is the only way he can be accepted in white society.

Samad and Poppy walk through the city, talking, and Poppy confesses that she likes him. Samad reacts harshly, telling her that there is "nothing good" about their situation. Poppy tells him that he can leave if he wants to, but he says that he wants to spend the night with her; she shows him a toothbrush that she bought for him so that he can stay overnight with her. Just then, Samad spots his two sons nearby, "their white teeth biting into two waxy apples."

Even as Samad attempts to create distance between himself and his family by engaging in an extramarital affair, his sons find him, showing that family ties are not so easily broken. Magid and Millat's "white teeth" (contrasted with their dark skin) subtly remind Samad (and the reader) of just how conspicuous all three Iqbal men are at this moment—just as Mr. J. P. Hamilton said that he could identify Congolese men by their teeth.


CHAPTER 8

O'Connell's Poolroom is an eccentric bar that is neither Irish nor a poolroom, and the kind of place that "family men come to for a different kind of family." This is Archie and Samad's "home from home," and they have been meeting here every day for 10 years to discuss anything and everything. Samad has confessed to Archie that he cheated on Alsana, and Archie tells him to meet him at O'Connell's at four o'clock, but at 4:15, Archie hasn't showed up. Samad talks to Abdul-Mickey, the chef, waiter, and proprietor, who tells Samad that his son, Abdul-Colin (Mickey gives all of his sons the name Abdul "to teach them the vanity of assuming higher status than any other man"), has recently gotten very strict about his Muslim religion.

O'Connell's is a space in which diverse cultures, opinions, and histories clash: it is the staging ground for many of the disagreements between Archie and Samad, but it is also a place where they find common ground—to meet and connect, despite their obvious differences in background, religion, and ethnicity. It's notable that the "family" the two have at O'Connell's is actually much more intimate than the families they have with their wives, since they often hide things from Clara and Alsana but are generally open with each other.

Archie enters, greets Mickey and the other two regular patrons, Denzel and Clarence—"rude, foul-mouthed octogenarian Jamaicans"—and finally meets Samad, who tells Archie about seeing his sons while on the date with Poppy. Samad says that he now has a "choice to make, a choice of *morality*"—similar to the choice Archie made during the war, with Dr. Perret. Samad believes that there is a "rebellion" in his sons, who don't respect tradition. Archie goes to get his food from Mickey and banters with him about Samad. Archie reflects that what he loves about O'Connell's is that "everything was remembered, nothing was lost": "history was never revised or reinterpreted, adapted or whitewashed."

O'Connell's is also a space that stands outside of history, preserving tradition: nothing ever changes in O'Connell's, where the men participate in the same rituals for years upon years. Archie, who is averse to change, finds O'Connell's comforting for this very reason, since it allows him to live a steady, stable life. Of course, refusing to consider reinterpreting history also means refusing to move into the future—for example, women never come inside O'Connell's, and Archie and Samad never make much progress in their musings.

The narrator expounds on tradition as an "even more sinister analgesic" than religion because tradition doesn't usually look sinister: Samad believes that roots are always a good thing, but the narrator notes that "the first sign of loose **teeth** is something rotten, something degenerate, deep within the gums." Samad begins to think about sending his sons back to Bangladesh, but he doesn't have the money to send both of them there. Back in O'Connell's, Samad tells Archie his plan: to send one son to Bangladesh, separating the twins. Yet he cannot decide which one to send. Millat is in need of more "moral direction," while Magid is Samad's favorite. Samad continues struggling to decide for a couple of weeks until he reads a characteristically mysterious letter from Horst Ibelgaufts to Archie, in which Horst describes chopping down an old oak tree in his garden. Archie takes this to mean that to mean that Samad has to send Millat away. Eventually, though, he settles on Magid, after consulting with Poppy and even letting Archie flip a coin.

While Samad believes that tradition is something to be maintained, followed, and passed on, the narrator notes that tradition can be inhibiting and destructive, like a gum infection that eventually spreads to the teeth. Indeed, Samad's desire to keep tradition alive in his family—in order to atone for his own sacrilegious actions, such as the affair with Poppy Burt-Jones—leads him to separate his sons, an action that will have enormous repercussions later on.

Samad has not told Alsana about his plans, and he is nervous when he comes home and discovers her weeping at the kitchen table. Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India, has been assassinated, and Alsana is crying for her friends in Bangladesh, who will be forced to endure riots and violence in response to the assassination. She says that she is relieved that her children will not have to experience such violence, and Samad, feeling guilty about his plan to send Magid to Bangladesh, disagrees; he says that their sons would have a better life back home than in England. Alsana and Samad get into a physical scuffle, which Millat and Magid watch with amusment. Afterward, Samad calls Poppy and breaks up with her.

Alsana and Samad display strikingly different views about their homeland, Bangladesh: while Alsana sees Bangladesh as dangerous, Samad longs for its traditions, viewing the West as corrupt (though he also allows the West to corrupt him).

At work, Shiva tells Samad that he was wrong to sleep with a white woman. The restaurant, nestled in the heart of London's theater scene, is crowded on this Saturday night; Ardashir orders the waiters to bring rice and naan bread for the white theater-goers, who are unused to spicy Indian food. Samad is requested to wait on a table, and when he walks over, he sees Poppy Burt-Jones and her sister. Poppy mocks him briefly.

Samad is forced to serve Poppy Burt-Jones as a customer in the curry restaurant, literalizing his position beneath her in a xenophobic British society (as an immigrant and a man of color). The fact that Poppy specifically requests his services also indicates that this subjugation is intentional: even though Poppy claims to be culturally sensitive, she quickly uses her whiteness as a weapon to get back at Samad.

At 1:00 a.m., Archie pulls up outside of the restaurant, where he meets Samad. He admits that when he tried to wake up Magid to bring him to the airport, he also woke up the other children, who were having a sleepover. Samad tells Magid that he is going to Heathrow Airport; years from now, "this will be history that Samad tries not to remember," "false **teeth** floating silently to the bottom of a glass."

Samad is clearly conflicted about separating his sons—years later, he does not wish to remember what he did—but nonetheless carries out the plan, since he wishes to remove Magid from corrupt Western society. This moment makes it clear that history, though important, isn't static; it exists in different forms that people can interpret as they wish. Here, false teeth are first used as a symbol to represent submerged secrets or a suppressed part of the past; later in the novel, the symbol becomes literal, since Clara is revealed to have had false teeth all along, a secret she keeps from Irie.

CHAPTER 9

Alsana believes that the difference between people is not color, but something more fundamental—something in the earth, in the sky. For Alsana, it seems that some people live on solid ground, while others—the people of Bangladesh—live "under the invisible finger of random disaster, of flood and cyclone, hurricane and mudslide." This is what Alsana holds against Samad: that Magid has been sent to a dangerous country. For weeks after he left on the flight to Bangladesh, Alsana mourned his departure with her relatives, though she realizes that many of them take pleasure in her misfortune. She learns that Magid broke his nose in a cyclone, after a vase fell off a shelf in the mosque he was in.

Alsana is devastated by Magid's departure, since she knows that Bangladesh is a dangerous place in which to live. Despite the difficulties of living in England, Alsana also realizes that living in the West is stable—that it is "solid ground," as opposed to Bangladesh. The fact that Magid is injured while in a mosque also hints that Samad's plan to protect Magid through religion might not go as intended.

Alsana has decided to stop speaking directly to her husband so that he can have the same experience that she has after Magid's disappearance—"never *knowing*, never being *sure*." The Iqbals receive a letter from Magid, and when Samad reprimands Millat for being so unlike his brother—whom Samad calls "a leader of tribes"—Millat laughs so hard that he loses his footing, slips, and breaks his nose against the kitchen sink. Magid has been preserved in Samad's mind as "invisible and perfect," and Samad learns to worship that invisible idea, whereas Millat proves difficult. Though younger by two minutes, Millat does not think of himself as a follower but as a "rudeboy," a "badman," obsessed with gangster movies and sex. Samad believes that Millat (and other immigrant children he knows) has turned out badly because immigrant children are "too safe" in Britain, living with overprotective parents and carefully mapped futures.

The Iqbals are torn apart by Samad's plan to return Magid to Bangladesh. Though the brothers will be forced to grow up apart, Millat also breaks his nose at the same time that Magid does, so that the two boys maintain similarities even while separated—and even though Samad thinks of them as radically different. This persistent connection shows that family ties and the pressure of shared history are often stronger than any attempt—like Samad's—to reshape the future.

Though separated, Millat and Magid are living parallel lives: while Magid walks through the violent crowds of Dhaka, Millat is battling three drunken Irishmen outside a pub; when Magid almost died in a tornado in 1989, Millat almost contracted an STD from a girl he slept with. In 1987, a storm hits London, and Millat, Alsana, and Samad escape from their house—which is battered by the weather—to Archie's.

Magid and Millat's lives are eerily similar, despite the distance between them, suggesting the enduring power of their family ties: both experience natural disasters, violent scenarios, and have close calls with death.

When Millat walks into Archie's house, Irie is writing about him in her notebook: "Millat just walked in. He's sooo gorgeous but ultimately irritating!" The two families gather together, and Samad discusses the story of Mangal Pande as a means of entertainment. Suddenly, a tree crashes through Archie's house; Samad, Archie, Alsana, and Clara are shaken, but Millat and Irie walk outside to observe the storm. Millat confronts Irie about her crush on him, and while mocking her, he kisses her briefly.

Throughout the novel, Irie experiences romantic feelings for Millat, who does not reciprocate these feelings. As Joyce Chalfen says later in the novel, the two have "history" between them, and they are bonded like family, despite their differences in culture, ethnicity, and upbringing.

On January 14, 1989, Millat is traveling to Bradford with his "crew" (Rajik, Ranil, Dipesh, and Hifan). After taunting the ticket man, who calls him a "Paki" in response, Millat and his crew rush to board a train without tickets. They consider themselves part of a new breed, *Raggastani*: their mission is "to put the Invincible back in Indian, the Bad-aaaass back in Bengali." Millat's friends ask him if "he" is going to be in Bradford, calling the anonymous man a "fuckin' geezer." Millat says that they are attending a protest, and the man who they are protesting for a book he has written—Salman Rushdie, whose novel is considered anti-Islam—will not be there.

Millat becomes more and more radicalized throughout the novel, attempting to adhere to fundamentalist Islamic beliefs: this is in response to his upbringing in England, where he feels powerless, like an outsider (as emphasized by the ticket man's use of the word "Paki," which is a derogatory term for East Indian people). The protest that Millat mentions refers to real-life protests against the novelist Salman Rushdie, whose book The Satanic Verses *drew extreme and sometimes violent controversy for what critics said was its blasphemous depiction of Islam.*

Back in Willesden, Samad is also complaining about Rushdie's novel, and he gets into an argument with Alsana. They notice Millat on the television as part of a news report on the protests in Bradford; he is burning Rushdie's book. Later that night, Millat returns home to see all of his "secular stuff"—albums, posters, clothes, books—placed in a bonfire. Alsana says that Millat had to be "taught a lesson" for burning other people's things.

Though Samad and Alsana are also religious (Samad more so than his wife), they are disturbed by their son's fundamentalist actions, which they view as overly extreme. Millat is a product of both Western and Eastern cultures (evidenced by the number of "secular," Western items he owns), and his parents struggle to address the problems this tension causes. Millat chooses fundamentalism because he is frustrated by his own position in between these two different systems; it is only later in the novel that Samad acknowledges the challenges of his son's double identity.

On November 10, 1989, the Iqbal and Jones families gather to watch the Berlin Wall come down—though no one really understands how this event came to be or what it means. Irie, who feels confident in her own beliefs, says that she knows more about Germany than Samad, since he and Archie left the country in 1945. The families bicker about the importance of the wall: Samad claims that he and Archie are like "wells of experience" or "encyclopedias" for their children.

The Iqbal and Jones families bear direct witness to a number of important historical events: the end of World War II, and now the collapse of the Berlin Wall. These monumental events seem disconnected from their personal histories (they're not even clear on what the Wall's significance is), yet events that Archie and Samad believe they left behind in World War II recur later in the novel—world history and personal history continue to intersect.

CHAPTER 10

Nothing ever seems to change in O'Connell's, which seems to be both outside of time and history and integral to Samad and Archie's own history. It is the place where Samad and Archie celebrated fatherhood and Archie's remarriage, among other notable events; it is also a place that they know inside and out, and they consider themselves "historians" of the place. Ali, Mickey's father, set up the restaurant, which Mickey took over after Ali died (from a heart attack, which Mickey's family decides is the result of the "unholy consumption of pork products": as a result, pig is banned from O'Connell's). Mickey has set up an underground gambling room with two tables, the "Death" table, for those who want to play for money, and the "Life" table, for those who do not. Archie and Samad play on the "Death" table.

Samad and Archie live cyclical lives, playing out many of the same events and behaviors time and time again: for example, Samad returns frequently to the story of Mangal Pande, while Archie resorts to coin flips to make difficult decisions. Similarly, O'Connell's is a place in which Archie, Samad, and the other patrons repeat the same actions over and over—gambling, drinking, eating, and meeting to discuss their lives. Although the two consider themselves to be "historians" of the place, the way that it never changes suggests that sometimes, history is a similarly rigid pattern of repeating events.

Samadd wants Mickey to hang up a portrait of Mangal Pande, but Mickey is hesitant. Samad becomes furious, and to appease him, Mickey agrees to hang it up for a week. Samad knows that only he and an obscure historian, A. S. Misra, believe in the worth of Mangal Pande, but he thinks that Pande has been misrepresented in history; the English adjective "Pandy" refers to Pande, who is defined in the dictionary as a "traitor," a "fool," and a "coward." Samad disagrees vehemently with this assessment, and he attempts to stage Pande's revolt in O'Connell's, playing out the story for the restaurant's patrons.

Samad clings to the story of Mangal Pande because it allows him to connect to his heritage and family background, even in British society, where he is an outsider. It also provides him with a sense of identity, allowing him to think of himself as the descendant of a great hero (though in day-to-day life, he is only a waiter and an ex-soldier, and he did not accomplish anything particularly heroic during the war).

Samad describes Mangal Pande's story: in 1857, a new kind of British bullet was produced for use by Indian soldiers, who discovered that the bullters were covered in pig grease, which was considered "monstrous to Muslims." Mangal Pande, an unknown sepoy (a soldier under British command), stepped "forward from the throng to make a certain kind of history." Archie believes that Pande was a drunken fool who shot at his lieutenant and missed him; he stood trial and was found guilty and executed. Samad, though, believes that Pande "sacrificed his life in the name of justice for India." Archie thinks that Pande started the Indian mutiny too early and caused unnecessary deaths, but Samad hangs onto the arguments of A. S. Misra, an author Samad's nephew discovered as a Cambridge student. Samad traveled to Cambridge to discuss the book, which—though an insignificant piece of scholarship—argues for Pande's status as a hero.

Samad's obsession with Mangal Pande also speaks to his conflicted relationship with British culture and society. Pande stood up against his British oppressors—or so Samad believes—while Samad feels that he is anonymous, insignificant, and inferior in British society. With Pande as an ancestor, though, Samad feels that there is rebellion in his blood, which gives him a sense of purpose even as he struggles to define his own role in contemporary England.

Archie believes that Pande might have been "bullied" into starting the mutiny, but Samad believes that when a man's beliefs are attacked, "he will kill." Archie looks at Samad cryptically, saying, "there will be people he will save."

This moment foreshadows Archie's later revelation that he did not actually kill Dr. Perret as Samad believes, but spared him instead. Archie sympathizes with Mangal Pande, who he believes was forced to fire the shot at his lieutenant, just as Samad tried to force Archie to kill the doctor. Additionally, Mangal Pande, like Archie, was unsuccessful in killing himself. Pande's story seems to be connected to both Archie and Samad's lives, even though they have opposite views on what that story means.

CHAPTER 11

Irie Jones, who is now 15, has begun to dream about an ad she saw on a lamppost between her home and Glenard Oak Comprehensive, her school. It reads: "LOSE WEIGHT TO EARN MONEY," and Irie, who is overweight—with "Hortense's substantial Jamaican frame"—is obsessed with losing weight, even though Clara tells her there's nothing wrong with her. During her English class, she doodles a picture of her body and is caught by her teacher, Mrs. Olive Roody, while the children are reading Shakespeare's Sonnet 127. Puberty has "separated these old friends," Irie Jones and Millat Iqbal: Irie is insecure about her appearance, while Millat (on whom she harbors an intense crush) is traditionally attractive and highly popular, desired and respected by their peers.

Irie is extremely unhappy with her appearance, having internalized racist attitudes: her body type is not seen as conventionally attractive in British society, and she dreams about looking more like the white girls Millat is attracted to.

Mrs. Roody asks the students to interpret a line from the sonnet, and Joshua Chalfen, "the only kid in class who volunteered opinions," raises his hand to explain the line in question. Millat mocks Joshua, and Mrs. Roody makes Millat leave the classroom. Irie asks if the woman in the sonnet, described as a "dark" woman, is black, and Mrs. Roody explains that it wouldn't be possible for Shakespeare to have written about a black woman, since there weren't any black women in England in Shakespeare's time. At the end of the class, Irie is passed a note that reads: "By William Shakespeare: ODE TO LETITIA AND ALL MY KINKY-HAIRED BIG-ASS BITCHEZ."

Even in the classroom—a space of learning and community—Irie is confronted with cultural and racial ignorance (and even downright racism). Black people have lived in England for centuries, contrary to Mrs. Roody's statement, and the note Irie is passed at the end of class mocks her own appearance.

After school, Irie turns up to an appointment at P.K.'s Afro Hair: Design and Management, where a hairstylist, Jackie, asks her about her ethnicity. Irie says that she is half Jamaican, half English, and she tells Jackie that she wants her hair to be completely straightened. Jackie tells her that she shouldn't have washed her hair recently, since the ammonia used for straightening will burn her scalp. At P.K.'s, straightening black women's hair is painful, difficult, and often unsuccessful, but the women patrons are obsessed with attaining completely straight hair—"straight straight flickable, wind-blowable locks."

Motivated by the racial prejudice that she experiences at school and in British society more generally, Irie hopes to straighten her hair in order to fit in with white girls at her school; other black women who frequent P.K.'s salon feel the same way as Irie, demonstrating the extent to which whiteness is valorized over black identities and appearances.

Andrea, another hair stylist, appraises Irie's hair, calling it beautiful. Irie insists that Andrea straighten it, but two minutes after she applies ammonia, Irie feels her scalp burning. She blacks out, and when she comes to, her hair has fallen out in clumps. Andrea calls Paul King, a white man in his mid-50s who owns the salon—a business he developed after discovering that "women on low income were […] prepared to spend hundreds of pounds per month on their hair"—and who tells Andrea to give Irie a "freebie." Andrea sends Irie to a store called Roshi's Haircare for "eight packets of number-five-type black hair with a red glow."

In her desperation to have her hair straightened, Irie goes through with the painful relaxing procedure, even though Andrea tells her that her natural hair is beautiful. Her desire to fit in—to seem normal, which in this case means closer to white—is one that Paul King recognizes as profitable, demonstrating the ways in which powerful white British men often exploit black people (a theme that runs throughout the novel and Irie's family history).

Irie approaches the counter at the store, where an Indian girl whose hair has been "shorn haphazardly" is arguing with the shopkeeper, "a hugely fat woman in a sari." The Indian girl wants more than 25 pounds, but the woman in the sari refuses to give her any more, calling her "ungrateful." When Irie asks for the hair that Andrea has told her about, the shopkeeper hands over the hair that the Indian girl has just sold to the store, telling her that many black women want Indian hair. A black woman in line behind Irie mutters that "some of us are happy with our African hair, thank you very much […] And I wish to God I could buy black hair products from black people for once." The woman in the sari insists that she is "just providing a service," and that she is not a racist; it's not her fault if black people want straighter hair or paler skin. Afterward, Irie encounters the black woman outside the store, who tells her that she hates the place.

The Indian girl Irie encounters has clearly been forced to sell her hair for money, suggesting that women of color in British society are significantly marginalized—even by other women of color, including the woman in the sari, who exploits both the Indian girls' need for money and black women's desire for different appearances. However, the black woman Irie encounters outside of the store—who only wanted hairpins from the shop, not fake hair—shows that not all black women hope to have straight hair or look white in some way. But nonetheless, they have been told by people like the shopkeeper that it is natural for them to want straight hair and paler skin.

Five and a half hours later, Irie has a "full head of long, straight, reddish-black hair," a weave. Irie walks to the Iqbal house, where she encounters Neena and Maxine, Neena's girlfriend, who react with shock when they see her new hairstyle. Irie wants to see Millat, since she wants to impress him with her hair. Neena says that ever since she's known Irie, Irie has followed Millat "around like a lost dog": the reason he hasn't been interested in her romantically is because the two have "history," and know each other, whereas Millat doesn't know the women he sleeps with. Alsana complains to Irie about Neena and Maxine's "homosexuality," and Irie encounters Samad briefly, who she thinks seems sad. Alsana tells her that he is sad about Magid, showing her a photo of Magid—still in Bangladesh—with the Indian writer R. V. Saraswati, whom Samad calls a "colonial-throwback."

Both Magid and Irie seem intent on assimilating into Western culture: Irie believes that her straightened hair will make her more like the white women that Millat pursues, while Magid is drawn to the writing of "R. V. Saraswati," a parody of the real-life writer V. S. Naipaul, who has been criticized for being sympathetic to Western imperialism.

Magid has written to his family to tell them about his meeting with Saraswati, noting that it is his "intention to make the Asian countries sensible places, where order prevailed." Magid writes that Indians "must be more like the English," since the English "do not listen to history unless it is telling them what they wish to hear." Samad is frustrated because Magid seems to have abandoned his Muslim beliefs, while Alsana tells him that he must let Magid go because it's only natural that a child born in England would think differently than one born in Bangladesh.

Alsana sees that her son is a product of conflicting influences and cultures, Western and Eastern, and that although he lives in Bangladesh, he is still influenced by his past life in England—just as Millat is torn between the British society he has been brought up in and his own desire to adhere to Eastern tradition and Islamic teachings. Magid's comment about the English approach to history is also telling; he seems to commend the kind of willful reinterpretation of history that Samad and Archie often indulge in, even though this very habit will eventually have serious consequences for all the novel's characters.

Glenard Oak—Irie and Millat's school—was built in two stages, first in 1886 as a workhouse, and then added to in 1963, when it became a school. The school contains "patches, hangouts, disputed territories, satellite states, states of emergency, ghettos, enclaves, islands": all different factions that battle with each other. Many of the students take and exchange drugs and smoke cigarettes, in part because cigarettes have a "power to bring people together across cultures and faiths."

Though Glenard Oak is by no means a racial utopia, it is a hodgepodge of cultures and ethnicities, and it is not segregated by race. Rather, its students are all united by their smoking. The novel puts forth a tongue-in-cheek portrait of a multicultural, progressive school, where drugs are more important that racial divisions or cultural differences.

At school, Irie is looking for Millat, since she has heard through the grapevine that there is going to be a raid on marijuana possession at the school. She finds him smoking a joint with a friend, Hifan, who is telling him that "marijuana weakens one's abilities, one's power, and takes our best men away from us in this country." Hifan tells Irie and Millat that he is from the "Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation," or KEVIN, while Irie tries desperately to tell Millat about the raid. She accidentally steps on Joshua Chalfen's Goblins and Gorgons game, and Joshua looks up at her: he sits behind her in orchestra, and he thinks of her as "clever and not entirely un-pretty." Joshua suspects that even though she is friends with the popular, attractive Millat, Irie is actually a nerd like Joshua.

Millat is enticed to join KEVIN, a fundamentalist Islamist group, by his friend Hifan, who appeals to Millat's desire for power and authority (though Millat is unable to give up smoking marijuana, even after joining KEVIN). Millat feels powerless in British society, and KEVIN seems to offer him a way out of this disempowerment.

Joshua tells Irie that he likes her short hair (she has had the weave removed), and he asks if he can smoke some of her joint. Irie passes him the joint just as the raid committee enters the yard, catching Millat, Irie, and Joshua in the act of smoking weed. Later, the headmaster of Glenard Oak—a "bleeding-heart liberal" who believes in "problem solving" rather than "behavior chastisement"—calls them into his office to explain the situation. Irie tells the headmaster that the weed was Millat's, and Joshua held the joint for her while she tied her shoelace; Joshua, though, tries to cover for Irie, telling the headmaster that he has become a marijuana dealer. The headmaster punishes the children by mandating that Irie and Millat go to Joshua's house every Tuesday and Thursday for study group, since he believes that Irie and Millat will benefit from spending time with the impressive Chalfen family.

Though the headmaster of the school describes himself as progressive, he also assumes that Irie and Millat need to be exposed to a white, intellectual family in order to become less rebellious and stop misbehaving—a fundamentally prejudiced assumption.

The history of Glenard Oak traces back to Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, who started the school as a workhouse for English and Caribbean people. A successful colonialist living in Kingston, Jamaica at the beginning of the 20th century, Sir Edmund donated money to a missionary group in London to start a factory, using immigrants from Jamaica as laborers. Glenard was killed in the 1907 Kingston earthquake while Irie's grandmother, Ambrosia, looked on; meanwhile, the workhouse had begun to fail as an operation, and the Jamaicans were left to die or become sideshow exhibits in the British Empire Exhibition. The narrator notes that the headmaster, who believes in Glenard Oak as a great institution of education, is wrong: "Glenard could not be said to have passed on any great edifying beacon to future generations."

Despite its diversity, Glenard Oak is founded on a history of imperialism and oppression. Its history also intersects with the Jones's family history, demonstrating the way in which political and world history directly impact families and individuals in unexpected ways.

CHAPTER 12

The chapter begins with an excerpt from Joyce Chalfen's book, *The New Flower Power*, which advocates for creating "gardens of diversity and interest" through cross-pollination. Joyce wrote the book in 1976, and it proved surprisingly popular; she had recently given birth to Joshua, and she was happily married to Marcus, whom she met at university (and whom she considers "her favorite genius"). Marcus was also writing a book in 1976, a study of "chimeric mice": a biologist, Marcus works on genetic transformations, supported by "the firm belief in the *perfectibility* of all life, in the possibility of making it more efficient, more logical [...] more effective, more *Chalfenist* in the way it proceeded." Marcus is stubbornly rational, a trait handed down the Chalfen family for generations: "truth was truth to a Chalfen."

The Chalfen family is happy and seemingly perfect: they are successful and intelligent middle-class Londoners. Yet the narrator suggests that the "Chalfenist" focus on "perfectibility" and rationality is misguided and narrow-minded: they are unable to see value in other systems of belief or ways of living (despite Joyce's book's outward focus on cross-pollination).

Fifteen years later, Joyce and Marcus have four children and have produced many more books; their children are all extremely intelligent, despite the fact that they attend Glenard Oak (which is not a private school). The family attends regular therapy sessions, and they rarely argue or disagree; they also have no friends, since they don't think they need other people. Still, as the century is drawing to a close, the Chalfens are bored by their own perfection and self-reliance. In particular, Joyce misses being the "linchpin of the Chalfen family"— as she was when she had to dress and breastfeed her children.

Joyce aligns with traditional gender roles: she wishes to nurture people (just as she nurtures plants), and this leads her to interfere significantly with Millat's life, as she attempts to take him under her wing.

On the day that Irie and Millat walk "reluctantly" into Joyce's life, she is in the back garden, thinking about "thrips"—minute insects that eat plants from within. Marcus calls Joyce into the house to greet the children, and Joyce is immediately struck by Millat's appearances: "beauty where you would least suspect it," in a "tall brown young man who should have been indistinguishable to Joyce from those she regularly bought milk and bread from." Irie is immediately interested in Joyce and Marcus, especially the way they include the children in conversation. Joyce asks the children where they are from *originally*, and Millat tells her that he is from Whitechapel. When Millat goes outside to smoke a cigarette, Joyce remarks that he "doesn't seem at all like most Muslim children," who she believes are "terribly meek."

Joyce is struck by Millat, since she has never thought that Muslim or brown children could be beautiful or confident (instead of "terribly meek"). Her understanding of race and culture is limited and stereotypical, since she also believes that Millat cannot be a "real" Londoner, though he was born in England—that because of his skin color, Joyce thinks that he must be "originally" foreign.

Irie realizes that she has never been "so close to this strange and beautiful thing, the *middle class*": Joyce and Marcus are a happily married couple, a rare breed at Glenard Oak. Millat, though, only sees the family's money—"money in need of a good cause that might as well be him." Joyce believes that Irie and Millat are damaged: Irie lacks a father figure and has low self-esteem, while Millat has a seems to have a deep kind of pain that she hopes to fill with love. Observing Marcus and his children, Irie realizes that "there existed fathers who dealt in the present, who didn't drag ancient history around like a ball and chain."

Irie realizes that the Chalfen family is very different from her own family: that the Chalfens live in the present instead of the past, and that they are far happier than the Jones or Iqbal families. Yet she doesn't seem to realize that this is a product of their backgrounds and the different status afforded to them by virtue of their wealth and race—the Joneses and Iqbals are families made up of working-class people and immigrants, and many of the problems they experience (as well as Samad and Archie's shared fixation on the past) have to do with race, money, and cultural tensions.

The narrator notes that this century has been one giant experiment in immigration, and that the immigrant who hears about nationalists fearing "infection" laughs, since immigrants are fearful of their own dissolution or disappearance. Alsana is frightened that Millat will marry a white woman, "diluting" their "Bengaliness." Clara, too, though she married a white man herself, is disappointed to see Irie worship white movie stars and surround herself with white friends. For this reason, Irie doesn't mention her visits to the Chalfen house to her parents, though secretly, she wishes she could "merge" with the Chalfens.

The history of immigration in Britain involves a fear of "infection": white Britons are terrified of immigrants taking over their country. But immigrants are also afraid of white people taking over their culture—as they have done for centuries as colonizers. Alsana and Clara's concerns show how this tension can play out at the level of families and individuals.

Talking to Irie and Marcus during one visit, Joyce says that Millat needs plenty of support, since he is from a "very difficult background," while Irie is "touchy about her weight" (though Irie insists she isn't). Millat storms in with bloodshot eyes, and Joyce immediately tries to comfort him. Joshua is beginning to get annoyed about how attractive Millat is—to both Irie and his mother. Millat tells Joyce that Samad has kicked him out for using profanity, but Millat complains that he is a better Muslim than his father. Millat has begun to hang around KEVIN more and more, while Samad drinks and has no Muslim friends.

In his search for self-discovery, Millat has turned to the fundamentalist group KEVIN, which he believes will provide him with purpose and set him apart from his father, whom he finds strict and controlling. Ironically, Millat believes that Samad is not a "real Muslim," though Samad has attempted to prove that he is a devoted Muslim throughout the novel and even sent Magid away so that he could be grow up to be a devout Muslim too.

Marcus invites Irie upstairs, where he keeps his **FutureMouse** project. His study is outfitted with portraits of Einstein, Crick and Watson, and an anonymous old man, who Marcus identifies as his mentor, a Frenchman; there are also portraits of Marcus's ancestors. Irie expresses her astonishment at the fact that the Chalfen family can trace their heritage back clearly, while the Bowden family history is more muddled. The narrator provides a vague family tree, tracing the Bowden line back in rough detail.

The Chalfens have benefitted from their wealth and definite place in society for centuries, while the Bowdens, who have been subject to colonialist oppression and displacement, have a far more complex family tree and history. It's also notable that the Frenchman mentioned will later turn out to be Dr. Perret, though Irie doesn't know about him at this point.

Marcus shows Irie photos of the **mouse**, its stomach covered in "little mushroomlike growths." Marcus explains that its genome has been re-engineered so that specific cancers are "expressed in specific tissues at predetermined times in the mouse's development," so that "you're no longer dealing with the random." Marcus tells Irie that when "you eliminate the random, you rule the world." He hires her to do his filing for 15 pounds a week, and Irie agrees, since she still wants to join the Chalfens and leave behind "the chaotic, random flesh of her own family."

Irie is drawn to "Chalfenism" because the Chalfens seem organized, settled, and firmly opposed to the "random," while her own family history seems "chaotic" and "random." Though Irie views this difference as proof that the Chalfens are inherently superior, it can also be chalked up to the differences between the two families' racial and cultural identities, since the Bowdens have not been afforded a definite place in society due to their racial and class statuses.

Alsana and Clara are not pleased that their children are visiting the Chalfen house so frequently—especially Alsana, who believes that Joyce is "bad-mouthing" her. The two meet with Neena at a movie theater to watch a French New Wave film; after, they discuss the Chalfens, who Alsana believes are taking her son away from her, "Englishifying him completely." Neena says that Millat is using the Chalfens as a "refuge" from his own family and the war raging between him and Samad, and she also tells Alsana that she should be worried about Millat's involvement with the KEVIN people, since they have "nothing to do with Islam proper."

Alsana believes that the Chalfens' influence on Millat is negative—that they are tearing him away from his family and his culture. At the same time, Millat is becoming more radicalized through KEVIN, moving away from "Islam proper"—even as he claims to be the most devout Muslim in his family. It's clear at this point that Samad's plan to make Magid into a devout Muslim is having unintended consequences for the whole family.

Clara asks Neena to go to the Chalfen house with Millat and Irie to see how the interactions there are playing out. When Neena turns up with Maxine, Joyce is dumbstruck by their lesbian relationship, since she can't comprehend the idea of "women loving women": she has "devoted her life to loving men." Marcus Chalfen tells Neena that "a Chalfen man and an Iqbal woman would be a hell of a mix": "Indian passion" mixed with Chalfen "sensibility," and Neena is visibly offended. Inexplicably, Joyce asks Neena and Maxine if they use each other's breasts for pillows.

Uunlike Neena, who steps out of traditional gender roles, Joyce is too set in her own ways as a traditional wife and mother to comprend the idea of "women loving women." Joyce and Marcus's comments to Neena and Maxine also show that they are deeply prejudiced and insensitive toward people of other races and cultures—despite Joyce's predilection for diversity and the whole family's commitment to supposedly objective truth.

Neena reports back to Alsana that the Chalfens are "crazy, nutso." Nonetheless, Irie and Millat continue to immerse themselves in "Chalfenism," and Samad begins to see his son as "neither one thing nor the other, this or that, Muslim or Christian, Englishman or Bengali." After the children perform well in their exams, a joint Iqbal/Jones celebration barbecue is held at the Iqbal home; the Chalfens turn up, and Clara strikes up a conversation with Joyce about their family histories. Joyce asks "which side" Irie gets her brains from, the Jamaican or the English, and Clara answers tentatively: "I guess the English in my side," thinking of her grandfather, Captain Charlie Durham. After Joyce leaves the party, though, Clara is frustrated at herself, since she knows that Captain Charlie Durham wasn't intelligent at all: "he sacrificed a thousand people because he wanted to save one woman he never really knew."

Clara knows that her white grandfather is not the reason that Irie is intelligent, but she is unable to explain this to Joyce, who would likely not believe that Jamaicans might be more intelligent than white people. Meanwhile, Samad at last begins to realize that his son has been influenced by both Islam and Christianity, British and Bengali culture: he cannot force Millat to be one thing or the other. It's worth noting that the same is probably true of Samad himself, though he doesn't yet confront that conflict for himself.

CHAPTER 13

Alsana and Clara mistrust English education. For Clara, it is because of what happened to her grandmother, Ambrosia Bowden, when she—the adolescent daughter of Captain Charlie Durham's landlady—became pregnant by Captain Durham in May 1906, in Kingston, Jamaica. Captain Durham told Ambrosia that he wanted to "give her lessons" three times a week, though he mostly gave her "anatomy" lessons—"given on top of the student as she lay on her back." Captain Durham told Ambrosia that she wasn't a servant anymore because she was now educated. Five months before Hortense, Ambrosia's child, was born, though, Ambrosia discovered that Captain Durham had left.

Clara's family line was directly impacted by colonialism and its harmful consequences: Captain Durham promised to "educate" Ambrosia, but ended up impregnating her and leaving her behind—just as the British empire wreaked havoc for the countries it controlled, under the guise of trying to improve conditions for these countries.

Durham entrusts Ambrosia's continued education to Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, who believed that the "natives required instruction, Christian faith, and moral guidance." Glenard brings Ambrosia to a Christian woman named Mrs. Brenton, who introduces Ambrosia to the Jehovah's Witnesses. Hortense Bowden believes that "at the moment her mother recognized Jehovah, Hortense herself became conscious."

Hortense's ties to religion are a direct result of the Bowdens' connection to colonialism in Jamaica—demonstrating the extent to which European culture and history have influenced, and continue to influence, colonized peoples and their descendents.

On January 14, 1907, as Ambrosia's pregnancy reaches full term, she walks down King Street, praying for "the return of Christ or the return of Charlie Durham—the two men who could save her." Sir Glenard blocks Ambrosia's path as she walks down the street and lures her into the old Spanish church nearby, where he begins to touch her breasts. Suddenly, the world begins to shake, and Ambrosia's water breaks; Glenard is crushed by the statue of an angel, and Ambrosia gives birth while the earthquake occurs. Durham returns to Kingston the next day, desperate to find Ambrosia; he finds her cousin and asks her to deliver a note to her, saying that he wishes to marry Ambrosia and take her with him on an outgoing ship. Ambrosia replies with one sentence from the Book of Job: "*I will fetch my knowledge from afar.*"

Like Clara, who hopes to find a savior in Archie Jones after leaving the church of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Ambrosia hopes to find a savior in Charlie Durham. Yet after the earthquake, she realizes that she must rely on herself, demonstrating a kind of independence that Clara and Irie, her descendants, also demonstrate.

CHAPTER 14

Marcus and Magid become pen pals from March 1991 onward, and Irie, tasked with Marcus's filing, steals several of the letters to read them: she discovers that "no love letters could have been more ardent" than the letters between Marcus and Magid. The men express admiration for each other's intelligence and ideas, and in one letter, Marcus writes that he doesn't "hold out much hope for [Irie's] aspirations," suggesting that she should become a dentist instead.

Marcus does not believe that Irie is as intelligent as Magid, and that she should become a dentist. Instead of taking this advice as an insult, though, Irie takes the suggestion in stride: she wants to become a dentist because she is interested in getting to the roots of things, trying to discover underlying problems—such as her family history.

Millat is having problems with white women: he has the choice of "every luscious female from a size 8 to a 28," but he chooses to mingle with "size 10 white Protestant women aged fifteen to twenty-eight." Karina Cain is his present amour, a girl he actually likes; at one meeting of KEVIN, though, Hifan and Tyrone give Millat a leaflet called *Who Is Truly Free? The Sisters of KEVIN or the Sisters of Soho?* After reading the leaflet, Millat begins to feel irritated by Karina, though he continues to meet up with her. Still, he begins to notice that she dresses provocatively, and it seems to Millat that she's trying to get attention from men. He tells Karina that he cannot respect her until she respects herself, and Karina tells him that she does respect herself.

Millat begins to become influenced by KEVIN and turns away from the womanizing lifestyle he used to lead, though he finds this difficult. He is still interested in Karina Cain, but he believes that he needs to devote himself to fundamentalist Islamic belief—a response to the conflicts he feels about his identity, which includes aspects of both Western and Eastern culture.

After working a shift at the Palace for extra money, Millat walks by a café and sees a "demure-looking Indian woman" sitting alone. Millat walks in and starts talking to her about the "liberation of the veil," telling the woman that by wearing a hijab, she will be "free to be who she is inside, immune from being portrayed as sex symbol." The woman rebuffs him gently, and as he walks away from the café, he becomes enraged; he calls Karina Cain from a phone booth and abruptly breaks up with her. Millat shows up at the Chalfen house that night, "weepy and violent." Joyce believes that Millat is "filled with self-revulsion and hatred of his own kind."

Joyce thinks that Millat is filled with "self-revulsion," but in fact, Millat is torn between his interest in both Islam and Western society: both of these are fundamental to his identity, and he is tormented by his own inability to choose between them (since he believes that he must stick to one system or the other).

Meanwhile, Irie is arguing with Clara over her decision to take a "year off" in Africa before going to school for dentistry. On October 25, 1991, at 1 a.m., Irie goes to her mother's bedroom, knowing that her mother "was most vulnerable when in bed"; she demands to talk to Clara, asking her for her permission to go to Africa. Clara is against the idea, since she believes Irie will be going to "ogle at poor black folk." In the darkness, Irie kicks over a glass of water and finds a pair of dentures. She realizes that Clara's **teeth** are false, and she is shocked to discover this new example of her family's tendency to keep secrets. Irie thinks that her parents are "full of information" that she wants to know but is afraid to ask about, and so she packs her rucksack and travels to Hortense's house.

Irie's discovery is another symbol of the idea that family histories are often kept hidden, even from members of the family. Irie is directly impacted by her mother's roots, and yet she doesn't know much about them. Returning to her grandmother's home is one way to find out more—and it's also a sign that it's essentially impossible to leave family and cultural ties behind, no matter how hard people like Clara might try to do so.

CHAPTER 15

It has been six years since Hortense and Irie last saw each other: Hortense is now 84, and Irie is 16. When she was younger, she had visited Hortense's house while her mother was at night school, but once Clara caught wind of the visits, she put an end to them. Hortense's house seems not to have changed in six years, though Darcus has died, leaving his chair empty. Hortense asks Irie if she is sick and treats her with bay rum to "burn de fever away"; she expresses her satisfaction that Irie has run "from that godless woman," Clara. Irie asks Hortense if she can stay at her house to study for a few months.

By returning to Hortense's house, Irie restores family ties that Clara has severed, bringing the family back together and suggesting that despite differences between family members (Hortense is religious, while Irie and Clara are not), families are fundamental and, in many ways, unbreakable.

Irie sleeps in the living room that night, and when she awakes, she sees a "bandy-legged redheaded man" walking into the house. Hortense tells her that the man is "Mr. Topps," who has been helping her since Darcuss died. Irie realizes that Mr. Topps has been living in Hortense's apartment for six years: he has never married, since he is "married to the church" of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Ryan enters the house, talking about church teachings, and Hortense introduces him to Irie, telling him that "she might have been yours." Ryan stares at Irie, dumbstruck, before quickly composing himself and telling Irie that he doesn't remember anything about Clara anymore.

Irie realizes here that she might be Ryan Topps's child, not Archie's—another family secret that has been hidden to her. Though this rumor is never confirmed, throughout her stay with Hortense, Irie grapples with questions about her identity and family history.

Hortense tells Irie that Mr. Topps is working with Jehovah's Witnesses from Brooklyn about "fixing de final date"—the date for the end of the world. Ryan Topps takes Hortense out to church on his motorbike, which he has kept for many years. Later, Clara calls Hortense, angrily saying that she doesn't want Hortense to fill Irie's head with religious nonsense. But while Clara's atheism is "fragile," Irie's is "robust," and she treats her stay with Hortense with "detached amusement." "Bowdenism," she realizes, involves "living in the eternal instant," always anticipating the end times and living by superstition; for example, Hortense always does the opposite of what's advised in weather reports, since she does not trust meteorology as a science (since she believes it defies God).

Hortense believes that the world is coming to an end, and as a result, she lives in the "eternal instant" of the present—always anticipating the end of history. By contrast, Irie hopes to escape from the reality of her own present by looking back on her own family history with interest.

After skipping class for a few weeks, Irie returns to school in January. She avoids Millat, the Chalfens, and her parents, only seeing them on the weekends; instead, she spends most of her time digging through Hortense's house, looking at pictures of her great-grandmother Ambrosia and Captain Durham. Durham looks "handsome and melancholy," "every inch the Englishman": by looking through the photos, Irie lays "claim to the past—her version of the past—aggressively." One day, she hears Joyce Chalfen on a program on Hortense's radio, talking about nurturing the "recalcitrant English soil"; she switches the radio off, thinking of Jamaica, which appears to her as a place "where things sprang from the soil riotously and without supervision." Irie imagines Jamaica as a place beyond fictions, myths, and lies, a true homeland.

Seeking escape from her complicated family life, Irie begins to dig into her ancestors' lives, viewing Jamaica—the homeland of her ancestors—as a place unspoiled by the conflicts and "lies" she connects to her immediate family. What Irie doesn't realize, though, is that Jamaica, where "things sprang from the soil riotously," is also the origin of her family's issues and specifically its conflict with England. Jamaica is where forces of colonialism first affected their family's development (through incidents like Durham's abuse of Ambrosia or Hortense's conversion to the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example).

Joshua turns up at Hortense's house one day, carrying a leaflet for an organization called FATE, or Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation. Joshua tells Irie that the group is "working from an anarchist perspective," and that by joining FATE, everything has changed for him. FATE's leader, Joely, thinks Marcus and the **FutureMouse** project are dangerous. Joshua has decided to become a vegetarian, since he believes that only major changes will get through to his father, who Josh believes is exploiting animals through the FutureMouse endeavor.

Joshua begins to separate himself from his family after becoming disillusioned with the FutureMouse project, though he will eventually find his way back to "Chalfenism": his interest in FATE later turns out to be motivated more by his interest in Joely than by his desire to separate himself from his family (though he does maintain different views and opinions from his father, attempting to find a unique place for himself in the world).

On April Fool's Day, Samad turns up at Hortense's house to ask Irie about Millat, who has been missing for three weeks. Samad tells Irie that Magid is coming back to England to study English law, paid for by the Chalfens; he is disappointed in Magid and Millat, who, in his opinion, have both "strayed so far from the life [he] had intended for them." Irie thinks that if Samad could take his sons back "to the start of the story, to the homeland," things might change; Samad says that in England, "you are never welcomed, only tolerated," but that he cannot leave, since he no longer feels as if he belongs anywhere.

Unlike Irie, who feels that returning to her roots might help her to make sense of her identity, Samad believes that he and his family are now permanently disconnected from their original heritage, though they are also disconnected from British society—where they are only "tolerated." The fact that Magid and Millat have both turned out so different from what Samad intended also demonstrates how futile it can be to try and control the way history shapes the future.

That evening, Hortense and Ryan are excited, since they believe that they have received a final confirmation for the date of the end times. Hortense explains to Irie that the Witness church is where her roots are, and she admits that she is tired with the church trying to tell her that she isn't educated enough: "dat's always bin de problem wid de women in dis family. Somebody always tryin' to heducate them about someting." Ryan announces that the end of the world will come at the end of 1999, before 2000, and Hortense rejoices. She tells Irie that they will go to Jamaica to see the end of the world together.

In this moment, Hortense seems to understand that her position as a woman in the Church of the Jehovah's Witnesses is not entirely equal to men: she is treated like someone who needs "education," just as Charlie Durham believed that Ambrosia needed "education"—to save her from her supposedly inferior way of life in Jamaica.


CHAPTER 16

Marcus is sitting in Heathrow Airport, smoking a pipe, when a pretty Asian girl—holding a copy of the book he published last spring—tells him that he can't smoke in the airport. Marcus asks the girl if she thinks that the book is good, and she tells him that she thinks it's a "headfuck." Marcus presses her, and she explains that she finds it frightening, since it is about genetic engineering: she believes that recombinant DNA technology might be used to wipe out Arabs. Marcus has been shocked by the reception of his **FutureMouse** project—mentioned in the book—which has been criticized by "a great ocean of idiots, conspiracists, religious lunatics," and others. The girl calls Marcus's book "fascist," though Marcus thinks that the book is concerned with "more prosaic developments in recombinant DNA"; people have focused on the mouse chapter, though, including Joshua, who now refuses to speak to his father.

Marcus's chance encounter with the young woman in the airport demonstrates that his FutureMouse experiment has potentially harmful undertones: his focus on genetic experimentation is similar to Dr. Perret's eugenics projects—indeed, Dr. Perret is directly involved with the project, though Marcus does not consider the experiment dangerous or "fascist."


As Marcus struggles to justify the book, the girl gets up and walks to her gate. Marcus remembers his appointment with Magid Iqbal at gate 32, which he has begun to think of as a "meeting of minds": he is picking up Magid from the neighborhood because the Iqbals' car broke down, and Marcus persuaded Alsana and Samad that there would not be enough room for Magid's luggage if they came with him in his car. Marcus believes that he and Magid will be a teacher and a willing pupil, and he reflects that though Magid will look identical to Millat, he will otherwise be completely different. Magid approaches Marcus, and he is struck by his appearance, which is "cleaner cut" than Millat's. Marcus marvels at the fact that Magid has spotted him from a crowd of many—evidence of their intrinsic connection—but Magid tells him that it was easy to spot him, since he is the only white person at the gate where the flight from Bangladesh has disembarked.

Marcus is not conscious of racial differences, nor of his own prejudice toward people he considers intellectually superior, even though these biases clearly shape his ideas. Though he is an extremely gifted scientist, he lacks perception, sensitivity, and empathy for others and their differences, and in this way, he represents deep-seated issues in British society.

Alsana tells Clara that she doesn't recognize Magid, who seems strange; he is fastidious, and he does not react when Alsana tells him that Millat is not living at home with them. Samad, too, is disappointed in Magid's intellectualism and atheism, but he is pleased that Alsana no longer addresses him with "maybe" or "possibility"—she now says "yes" and "no" to him. Millat returns at the beginning of October, determined not to see Magid on "political, religious, and personal grounds." Musical chairs ensues between the children: Millat stays with the Iqbals, Joshua goes to the Joneses', Magid stays with the Chalfens, and Irie also goes to the Chalfens to earn money working for Marcus. She is jealous of Magid, who is treated as an equal to Marcus, while she acts as Marcus's secretary; Magid helps Marcus prepare for interviews and press releases, bringing "Chalfenism to the people."

Though they have experienced both Western and Eastern cultures and influences, Millat and Magid have ended up on opposite sides of a spectrum. While Millat turns to Islamist fundamentalism, Magid turns to Anglicized atheism; still, both sons are bound by the traditions they share with their family, and by the personal ties they share as brothers and twins.

Magid and Marcus are oblivious to the "widespread displacement" that their friendship has caused for their families members. Irie, though, acknowledges that Magid is "good" and "kind," with "absolute empathy for everybody," though he is also somewhat socially awkward and stunted. Millat is still shunning Magid, who says that he has "converted to Life," seeing god in science and rationality. Irie realizes that Magid, like Mad Mary, is touched by "it"—"prophecy."

Just as Samad recognizes himself in Mad Mary, Irie recognizes that Magid and Mad Mary share certain traits, despite their superficial differences: both seem to believe in a higher truth ("prophecy"—science for Magid, delusions for Mary), perhaps as a way of grappling with their own outsider identities in a culture and society that does not seem to understand or accept them.

Irie gives a press release to a journalist calling about the **FutureMouse** project (which has become an "enormous, spectacular, *cartoon* of an idea"), describing an event that will take place on December 31, 1992: a two-week-old FutureMouse will be put on display at the Perret Institute in London. The mouse will be an experiment in cellular biology and the way that cancer progresses within cells. Irie tells the journalist that the mouse will live for seven years on display at the institute, and that at certain points in its aging, certain characteristics will appear, offering the public "a unique opportunity to see a life and death in 'close-up.'" This technology might hold the key for slowing the progression of disease and the process of aging.

With the FutureMouse experiment, Marcus Chalfen hopes to exercise control over the progress of history. Yet the experiment ultimately fails: at the end of the novel, the FutureMouse escapes from its cage, regaining control of its own destiny and showing that eliminating random chance isn't actually possible.

After Irie finishes her call, Joyce asks her not to use the phone, since she is concerned that Millat might be trying to call. Joyce wants to get Millat and Magid to face each other, since she believes that they need each other. She thinks that the two boys have experienced trauma because of the split in their religions and cultures. Irie tells Joyce that she should worry about her own family, particularly Joshua, whom she hasn't seen in two months. Joyce thinks that Joshua is just trying to get attention, whereas Magid has some "real problems." Irie disagrees, calling Magid a "Zen master."

Joyce's well-intentioned but prejudiced views lead her to believe that Magid and Millat have "problems" because of their upbringing in an immigrant family, and because of the tension between their different "religions and cultures"; she is oblivious to the fact that her own white, middle-class family is divided by similar problems.

CHAPTER 17

Joyce Chalfen goes to Alsana's house and asks to speak to her, but Alsana refuses to let her in the door; Samad, who is watching television, puts in earphones so he does not have to hear the women bickering. Alsana begins to sing over Joyce's pleas: "Whether you want me to be *involved* or not," Joyce says, "I am." Alsana believes that "involved" happens over a long period of time, that it is neither good or bad, just a consequence of living—of "occupation and immigration," "empires and expansion." She realizes that the exhausted way Joyce says "involved" suggests that the word means the same thing to her: "an enormous web you spin to catch yourself."

Alsana's ruminations on the term "involved" implicate both colonialism and patriarchy, two systems that "involve" others—women and colonized peoples—whether they want to be involved or not, and that act as major undercurrents in the novel, influencing all the characters' lives.

Alsana finally lets Joyce in and offers her a cup of tea with adding cheerfully that their water may or may not make Joyce sick. She also tells Joyce that she is the only reason that Magid and Millat are apart, since the Chalfens have involved Magid "in something so contrary to our culture, to our beliefs, that we barely recognize him." Unbeknownst to the two women, Millat has been standing in the hallway, listening in. Joyce suggests that the brothers meet at a "neutral place," and Alsana tells her that she's just making things worse. Joyce says that she thinks Millat is still traumatized from Alsana burning all of his "secular" items.

Though both women believe each other to be the source of the problems dividing Magid and Millat, the truth is somewhere in between: Alsana's sons are conflicted over their ties to both Eastern tradition and heritage, represented by Alsana, and British society, represented by Joyce.

Millat's subconscious is "split-level": he is trying to be ascetic in his habits in order to align with KEVIN and its teachings, and he believes that relying on faith, like Samad does, is "contemptible," since to KEVIN, Islam is a religion that can be "intellectually proved." Yet he is unable to purge himself of the West, since he is still obsessed with gangster movies. Worst of all, he's angry and self-righteous, especially when it comes to Magid. These are not pious thoughts, but Millat feels that he has the "fundamentals" down—clean living, praying, fasting, working for the cause. Still, he wants to face off with his brother, gangster-style.

Millat is struggling with his ties to KEVIN, since he cannot completely separate himself from aspects of Western culture he finds appealing—particularly the gangster mentality he has learned from gangster movies, which allows him to act more powerful. His struggle here is also reminiscent of Samad's struggle to live up to his own standards of purity, as described earlier in the novel.

Alsana persuades Samad to talk Magid into meeting with Millat, and Samad takes Magid to O'Connell's to do so. The other patrons are confused by Magid, since Samad rarely brings guests, and Magid is far younger than the other pub-goers. Mickey tells Magid that he has a "sympathetic" face, and that he is "civilized"; but when Magid asks for a bacon sandwich, Mickey's mood changes. He reminds Magid that's a Muslim, and that he shouldn't upset Samad by eating pork. Eventually, Mickey gives in and goes out to get some bacon; Magid invites him to the **FutureMouse** launch, telling him that Marcus's research could help to cure his disfiguring skin condition.

Magid's calm, rational ways even win over Mickey, who is drawn in by Magid's Anglicized mannerisms and his promises that science might help cure his skin condition. Magid is acting like European colonizers, attempting to convert the "less cultured" to European systems of knowledge and culture. His example demonstrates how internalized oppression can cause even members of marginalized groups to perpetuate their own oppression.

Samad is angry at Magid for talking to Mickey about the **FutureMouse**, and he calls Magid "a thorn in [his] foot." He tells Magid that Alsana wants him to meet with Millat, though he wishes that his sons would stay far away from each other. Samad is horrified to hear that Magid has ordered a bacon sandwich, and he calls his son "Mr. White-trousered Englishman with his stiff-upper-lip and his big white **teeth**." He tells Magid that KEVIN, including Millat, is organizing against the FutureMouse, but Magid's expression remains blank. Samad tells his son that meddling with a creature is tantamount to interfering with God, and that he wants to disown Magid for his disobedience. Archie flips a coin to decide whether the two boys should meet, but the coin lands in the pinball machine.

Samad is embarrassed by Magid's adherence to Western culture: to Samad, Magid has adopted the ways of his British oppressors, and he is defying his Islamic upbringing by turning to atheism and science. Yet Archie's attempt to rely on chance to answer questions—a coin flip—fails, suggesting that Magid's rational methods might be closer to the truth of the world. Samad's mention of Magid's "white teeth" links Magid's new persona to a betrayal of his roots, while also suggesting that Magid might be making himself vulnerable to those who would oppress him—just as the teeth of the Congolese men allowed J.P. Hamilton to target them more easily.

Clara offers to let Millat and Magid use a room at the university where she's taking classes as a neutral space, since it's hard to find genuinely neutral spaces. The university, though, is only 12 years old, and built on empty wasteland. Clara gives the key to the room to Joyce, who gives it to Irie, who she wants to set up the meeting. Irie walks to the Iqbal house, thinking back on the memories she has shared with Millat over the years and feeling as if she could "drown" in them. At home, Millat is reading about *sajda*, the act of prostration during prayer, but he becomes distracted, takes off his T-shirt, and practices lines from gangster movies at himself in the mirror. Irie walks in on him, and she goes up to him to explain the proposed meeting, putting one hand on his chest; suddenly, the two are kissing and making love on Millat's prayer mat, though they quickly stop. Horrified, Millat begins to pray for absolution, while Irie weeps and leaves the room.

Though Clara hopes to help the Iqbal sons find a space without any history in order to settle their differences without intrusions from the past, "history" finds them nonetheless—in the form of Irie Jones, Millat's oldest friend and the person who knows him best in the world Millat's genuine connection with Irie briefly overcomes his devotion to Islam, again demonstrating the difficulty of escaping both one's own history and history more broadly.

Irie thinks that Millat doesn't love her because he is too "damaged" to love, but the narrator notes that this isn't true, asking, "what was it about this unlovable century that convinced us we were, despite everything, eminently lovable as a people, as a species?" "Not everybody deserves love all the time," the narrator remarks, though Irie firmly believes that there must be a reason that Millat doesn't love her. She thinks that the reason must be Magid, since Magid has made Millat feel inferior all his life. She walks to the Chalfens' house, makes her way to Magid's room, and makes love to him, too; immediately, though, Magid realizes why Irie has come to him, and after, they lie together in silence. Magid says that Irie has "tried to love a man as if he were an island and you were shipwrecked and you could mark the land with an X."

Throughout the novel, the narrator shows that individuals are highly complicated, neither good nor bad: in both the present and the past, the novel's characters act in both honorable and dishonest ways, and they are not necessarily deserving of constant love. Magid's remark recognizes that Irie loves Millat because she believes that through Millat—someone she has "history" with—she will be able to understand her own complicated history and lay claim to an identity, as a shipwrecked person might claim an island.

Finally, on November 5, 1992, at 3 p.m., Magid and Millat meet together in the university room after an eight-year gap. Magid explains that he sees the **FutureMouse** project as "correcting the Creator's mistakes," but Millat says that the "Creator doesn't make mistakes"; the brothers begin to argue, and their argument escalates. They use the different items in the room—chairs, erasers, the overhead projector, the filing cabinets—to defend their distinct viewpoints, discussing the Qur'an, Mangal Pande, genetic experimentation, and finally, their own separation.

The brothers attempt to work out their differences in the same way that Samad and Archie attempted to work out the story of Mangal Pande in O'Connell's, using the space to play out different situations just as their father once did: Millat and Magid seem to be inadvertently repeating the past.

The narrator comments that immigrants are often thought of as "resourceful," "constantly on the move," "footloose": but Magid and Millat leave the "neutral room" "weighed down" and "burdened," feeling as if they have made no progress. They seem to occupy a space "equal to themselves" and "equal to Mangal Pande's, equal to Samad Iqbal's": they are both trapped in the present moment together. The narrator refers to Zeno's paradox, which shows reality to represent both "multiplicity" and a "seamless, flowing whole": likewise, the brothers are racing toward the future, attempting to differentiate themselves, only to find that they tend to keep enacting their past instead. Immigrants cannot escape their history.

In the novel, immigrants are shown to be both irrevocably tied to history and determined to escape it. They hope to move away from the stories of the past, but they nonetheless find themselves reliving what they hope to leave behind. For example, Millat and Magid hope to differentiate themselves from their father, but they find themselves repeating Samad's story—both rebelling against and assimilating into Western culture.

CHAPTER 18

Brother Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah is not a great speaker; listening to his speech, Millat feels "let down." This is the founder of KEVIN, born Monty Clyde Benjamin in Barbados in 1960. He studied in Riyadh after converting to Islam at the age of 14, and he began to express radical opinions about the religion. In 1984, he traveled to Birmingham, England, where he locked himself in his aunt's garage and spent five years studying the Qur'an: for this, he was nicknamed "the Guru in the Garage" in articles written by a journalist, Norman Henshall (KEVIN views these articles as anti-KEVIN propaganda). KEVIN is an extremist faction "dedicated to direct, often violent action," frowned on by the rest of the Islamic community, and they have gathered at the Kilburn Hall to listen to Brother Ibrahim speak.

Here, the narrator makes light of extremist behavior, suggesting that the motivations underlying fundamentalist beliefs are often less than noble and perhaps even comedic. Brother Ibrahim seems to be more focused on his own image, and his own role as a leader of a movement, than religious teachings; here, fundamentalism represents a perversion of Islamic belief.

Mohammed Hussein-Ishmael, the butcher, forces his way through the crowd to sit next to Millat in the hall. Mo is helping to fund Brother Ibrahim's tour around Europe, and he asks Millat if he finds the Brother impressive. Mo is a recent convert to KEVIN, and he is flattered that as a businessman, he has been called on for financial support. He has converted to KEVIN in part because of the violence he has faced: he was once tied up by three white men who set fire to his shop. Mo wants a "little payback," to have the "degenerate nature" of white people explained to him. Mo asks Millat if it is true that he knows Marcus Chalfen, and that he is organizing a protest on December 31. Millat tells Mo that if he wants to "get near the center" of KEVIN, he can't be talking about their plans. Meanwhile, Brother Ibrahim is discussing "a man who presumes to change, adjust, *modify* what has been decreed" by changing "an animal that Allah has created": Marcus Chalfen. Mo, Millat, Shiva, Abdul-Jimmy, Abdul-Colin, Hifan, and Tyrone gather in the hall's office together.

KEVIN appeals to Mo (and many of the other Muslim characters) because it offers a space for them to fight back against Western culture, in a society that does not accept them because of their beliefs. Marcus Chalfen's experiment, with its racist, colonialist undertones, is the ideal target for KEVIN and its newly radicalized members.

Meanwhile, Joshua is listening to Joely, FATE's leader, speak about FATE and a campaign they are launching: she is an intelligent, attractive woman who despises his father. Joely is married to Crispin, to Joshua's disappointment; the two met at the University of Leeds and formed FATE in 1985, attracting other political drifters to conduct a "terror campaign against animal testers, torturers, and exploiters." Kenny and Paddy, two seasoned FATE activists, tell Joshua that he will get over his crush on Joely. Crispin has already gone to jail for three years for fire-bombing a Welsh laboratory that used animal testing, and while in jail, Joely transformed FATE into a "viable underground political force."

FATE and KEVIN represent another instance of parallels in the novel, or repeated histories: different groups with different values that nevertheless both oppose Marcus Chalfen's FutureMouse experiment, and that pursue similarly radical and outlandish methods of protest.

Joshua met Joely and Crispin in Willesden, where they were looking for a squat; Joshua was immediately attracted to Joely, and he offered to help Joely and Crispin squat in an unoccupied Victorian building nearby. Joshua begins to realize that he loves Joely, that his parents are "assholes," and that the animal kingdom is "oppressed, imprisoned, and murdered on a daily basis." At one point, Joshua reveals himself to be the son of Marcus Chalfen, and Joely accepts him as a "convert from the other side." FATE is plotting Marcus's downfall, but Joshua is too in love with Joely to see what is going on. Joely asks the group whether they should devote their attentions to Marcus Chalfen or to releasing the **FutureMouse** from its captivity during the event on December 31, and Crispin decides to put it to a vote.

Joshua is too involved with FATE—and too in love with Joely—to realize that he is betraying his family by subscribing to FATE's beliefs, though he will later renounce his connection to the group and return to "Chalfenism," acknowledging that his family is a significant part of his identity.

On December 20 at midnight, Irie picks up the phone in her house. Ryan and Hortense have called her at exactly midnight (0000 hours) on the twentieth—signifying the year 2000—to warn Irie about the end of the world. Ryan warns Irie not to get involved with Marcus Chalfen, whom he calls "an enemy of all humanity." Meanwhile, Magid, completing work on the FutureMouse, is proud that he witnessed every stage of the **FutureMouse**'s development, which represents a triumph over randomness. "What is more God than *that*?" he thinks, removing his white coat.

Magid believes that the FutureMouse represents an antidote to the chaos and randomness of life. He believes that the mouse's development will play out according to a predetermined history, repeating certain events that Magid and Marcus have planned precisely. However, the mouse will actually end up playing out a very different version of history, one that's deeply tied to Magid's family's own history.

CHAPTER 19

It is Thursday, December 31, 1992, New Year's Eve. The consequences of what Joshua is about to do on this day have escaped him, given his obsession with Joely; he is seated in a bright red minibus with the other FATE members, driving toward Trafalgar Square. Kenny is reading a press release about the **FutureMouse** event, which describes the event apolitical. Minnie, a brand-new FATE convert who flirts openly with Crispin, shows the group a tabloid paper with a satirical cartoon of Marcus Chalfen. Crispin says that Marcus looks "more fucking Chalfenist than ever"; Joshua regrets telling Crispin about the term "Chalfenist," and he begins to feel as if he has betrayed his father.

Though he is still distracted by his crush on Joely, Joshua begins to realize that he has betrayed his family by joining FATE and by allowing his father to become a target of FATE's protests; he is beginning to come back around to his ties to "Chalfenism," though the word now takes on a meaning that has more to do with emotion than logic.

Joely asks Joshua if he is scared about the night and his "conflict of loyalties," complimenting him for remaining so calm. Joshua isn't sure whether he should act so passively, or whether he should be more "proactive" about shaping the future. He remembers thinking about "end-of-the-world" scenarios as a 12-year-old, and realizing that instead of doing anything rash or exciting, he would return to his room and continue building with Leogs. Joshua is terrified of consequences, and what he is about to do to his father is so enormous that the consequences seem inconceivable to him; he feels strangely detached. Joshua believes that "the world happens to you [...] you don't happen to the world," while Marcus believes the opposite.

Though Joshua has learned to disagree with some of his father's "Chalfenist" attitudes—namely, that individuals can control the world, and that action, rather than passivity, is best—he nonetheless realizes that "Chalfenism" is a part of his identity that he cannot give up. This tension (rather than any real loyalty to FATE and its mission) is at the core of what Joely calls his "conflict of loyalties").

Gathered at the Willesden Green Station, KEVIN—including Millat, Hifan, Tyrone, Mo, Shiva, Abdul-Colin, and Abdul-Jimmy—realize that there are no southbound Jubilee Line trains from Baker Street, which disrupts the route KEVIN are planning to take to the **FutureMouse** event. Millat is stoned: he has been smoking all day, and Shiva, concerned, asks him what he has been doing to himself. Millat says that he is preparing himself for action. Brother Ibrahim was arrested recently on charges of tax evasion and civil disobedience, and KEVIN soon realized that the police might be tracking their activity: they decided against "Plan A" and improvised a Plan B, which involves the seven KEVIN members standing up during the FutureMouse press conference and reciting Sura 52 from the Qur'an.

Unlike Joshua, who accepts his own passivity, Millat decides that he must be active, and that KEVIN's "Plan B" is not acceptable: he wants to act with the kind of temerity and boldness that Mangal Pande, his "esteemed" ancestor, was never able to.

Millat is disappointed by Plan B, since the KEVIN members are obsessed with finding the right translation for the Qur'an passage: Millat thinks that they are focused on words, not action, but Plan B has stuck nonetheless. Shiva tries to convince him to follow through with the plan. Twenty minutes later, the group gets off in Trafalgar Square. Looking around at the statues of men in the square, Abdul-Colin says that the English build their statues "with their backs to their culture and their eyes on the time"—the statues face Big Ben—because the English "look to their future to forget their past."

Abdul-Colin's remarks reflect on the history of the British empire and England's questionable colonial past. The notion of the "future" drove the English to colonize non-Western countries, since they hoped to "develop" them—bringing them out of "backwards" traditions and into the future, and aligning them with Western values. However, as Abdul-Colin hints, this fixation on the future also keeps the English from learning the lessons of their own history and understanding how that history still shapes them.


Millat hangs back as the group walks away from the square and toward Chandos Street, where the conference is. He walks over to a bench and finds the word IQBAL scrawled between one leg of the bench and the other: Samad wrote this a few months after arriving in England, after cutting his thumb open in the kitchen of the curry restaurant. He used his own dribbling blood to write IQBAL on the bench, then went over the word with a penknife. Samad explained to Millat that he was ashamed of writing his name there, since it meant that he "wanted to write [his] name on the world," like the Englishmen who "named streets in Kerala after their wives." Millat, though, thinks that it means that Samad is "nothing" compared to the statues of men in the square. But Millat believes that he—unlike Mangal Pande—is capable of turning this history around, and that he will write his name all over the world bigger than Marcus Chalfen's. Millat believes that decisions that are made come back, that "we live in circles."

Samad is embarrassed that he wrote his own name in London, since he believes this reflects colonizing impulses—the kind of impulses that motivated the British to take over India and Eastern countries. Even though Millat has turned away from British culture by joining KEVIN, he still wants to act with the kind of power and force that British colonizers acted with. Ironically, though, he ends up misfiring at the end of the book, just like Pande, proving his own philosophy (that "we live in circles") to be correct.


Ryan Topps was asked to assemble the Lambeth Kingdom Hall's Thought for the Day desk calendar for 1992, and for December 31, he included the following Bible citation: "He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." He believes that the citation is an apt warning for this day, and he drives Hortense in his motorcycle toward Trafalgar Square. Ryan has a skill for fixating closely on just one idea, and he finds that this makes him suited for the church of Jehovah's Witnesses, since he relishes facing evil and asking it to prove itself. He hopes to do the same to Marcus Chalfen, since he believes "the right to be the good guy" in the face of evil.

Though Ryan Topps seems to have changed dramatically since his days as a teenage rebel, he also seems to be repeating many of the same behaviors he demonstrated as a young man obsessed with drugs, sex, and his scooter: he has merely shifted the object of his obsession, becoming fixated on religion and morality instead (and showing that Millat's declaration, that "we live in circles," holds true for other characters as well).

While getting a ticket on the bus from Willesden Lane to Trafalgar Square, Archie realizes that the tickets seem different now. He asks Samad why the tickets might have changed, and Samad looks tense: everyone is on edge, since Neena has demanded that the Iqbal and Jones families attend the "mouse thing" in order to support Magid and Irie. Archie would have preferred to be alone on New Year's, just to avoid all of the drama. Horst Ibelgaufts sent him a "prophetic" letter the day before about his cat, Gabriel, who sits on top of the shed and watches Horst's other cats battling each other in the garden; Archie wonders if he should have acted like Gabriel. In the end, Alsana convinces all of them to go.

Tensions between the Iqbals and Joneses are coming to a head; the families' conflicts, histories, and secrets are bound to intersect at the FutureMouse event, and Archie—who normally avoids conflict—is dragged into the chaos, in which he will play a major role.


Samad replies irritably to Archie's question about the changes in bus tickets, and Neena tells him to stop being a "bully." Clara and Alsana chime in, and Irie tells all of them to "shut up": some families, she says, are quiet all of the time, and "they're not constantly making the same old mistakes." Happy families are not concerned with the past; they are content instead to live out their lives in the present. Irie is now eight weeks pregnant and knows it; she doesn't know the identity of the father, however. Her child seems to be a "perfectly plotted thing with no real coordinates"—since it is not "somebody's child," it is "nobody's child."

Though Irie has previously been fascinated by her own idealized version of her family history in Jamaica, she now wants to create a new sort of family: one unconnected to the past. Thus, she ultimately decides that she doesn't want to know the identity of her child's father, so that her new family might have a history of its own. It's also notable that even if she wanted to, Irie likely can't find out who the child's father is, since Magid and Millat are identical twins with the same DNA; this fact makes Irie's wish for disconnection from the past into a kind of literal reality.


Irie tells Archie that the bus tickets now include more information in order to deter people from paying less than they should for their journey—so that inspectors can check that people are paying enough. Archie wonders if fewer people cheated in the past, and he thinks that people need to hear that England "was once a green and pleasant land."

As Irie is moving away from the past, her father is still looking toward it: he believes that the past offers comfort and nostalgia, though ironically, the past will prove disruptive during the upcoming FutureMouse event.

The Iqbals, Joneses, Chalfens, FATE, KEVIN, and the Jehovah's Witnesses are all headed for the same room in the Perret Institute. It is a "neutral" space, covered in posters that read MILLENIAL SCIENCE COMMISSION in a variety of fonts and colors: the room has been designed to be a "space for Britain, Britishness, space of Britain, British industrial space cultural space space." The narrator says that people can finally give the answers required when a space is being designed, since they know what is meant by: "national identity? symbols? paintings? maps? music? air-conditioning? smiling black children [...] ?" Those who have lived this century, forced from one space to another, know what they want: "nothing nothing space please just space nothing please nothing space."

The Perret Institute is not truly a neutral space (like the university in which Millat and Magid met) but rather one loaded with symbols meant to reflect the diversity of British society. However, the narrator suggests that immigrants ("forced from one space to another") are seeking a neutral space free from these empty, meaningless symbols and the weight and complications of history.

CHAPTER 20

Archie thinks that the room is "very modern," just like on TV, though it is full of people he knows: Millat, Josh Chalfen, Marcus. Marcus is sitting next to four other men, three his age and one older. There is also a mouse scurrying around in a glass box with airholes, prominently displayed. Abdul-Mickey sits down next to Archie, and the two talk about "Science": Mickey says that at the end of the day, science has "got to please the people," and that there isn't much of a difference between a place like this conference room and Mickey's café. He is convinced that the **FutureMouse** experiment might help to cure his skin condition.

Mickey realizes that the FutureMouse conference room is not so different from O'Connell's, since both places are designed to "please the people"—to offer them a space that might help them to improve their lives (since Marcus believes his genetic experimentation holds the keys for solving many diseases). Once again, the same narrative seems to be playing out across different settings and different times.

Joshua and the FATE members are seated in the middle of the crowd, which will make it difficult for them to carry out their plan. Crispin is supposed to pretend to hold Josh hostage in order to get Marcus to surrender the **FutureMouse**, though Josh realizes that Crispin has "underestimated the power of Chalfenism": he thinks that his father might not choose to save him.

Joshua finally realizes that his family ties run deep: though he does not fully approve of "Chalfenism," he understands it to be a part of his own identity, and he understands his father far better than FATE seems to (realizing that Marcus may not back down on the FutureMouse project, even if his own son is held hostage).

Millat believes himself to be a "Pandy" deep down: "there's mutiny in his blood." He has procured a gun, though now that he is here, he feels scared to use it: he remembers Al Pacino in the first *Godfather* movie, huddled in a bathroom ("as Pande was huddled in the barracks room") before deciding to "blast the hell out of" his opponents.

Millat wants to change the course of history by refusing to make the same mistakes that Pande did, though ultimately, he will be foiled, just like his ancestor—he will not be able to fire the "heroic," mutinous shot that he decides to take.

Irie has asked her unborn child to "offer some kind of a sign" to figure out who his or her father is, but she hasn't received anything: "Irie's child can never be mapped exactly nor spoken of with any certainty." Irie imagines a time sometime soon "where roots won't matter anymore because they can't."

Irie hopes to move away from the past and toward a future where the past does not exercise as much control over events; ironically, however, the past is about to reemerge dramatically.

Meanwhile, Hortense, positioned outside of the Institute, has begun to sing hymns. Archie sends Samad out to see Hortense, who is standing with Ryan Topps and other Witness ladies, passing out copies of the *Watchtower* (Witness literature). Samad approaches Hortense, who is holding a banner reading, "THE TIME IS AT HAND." Samad tries to ask her if she can be quieter, but he gives up, "partly because he is tired," "partly because he is old," but mostly because he understands the desire to "seek."

Though Samad has railed against Western culture for much of the novel, he feels a connection with the Jehovah's Witnesses, who, like him, seem to be "seeking" answers to questions that seem unanswerable—about the meaning of life, the power of God and faith, and the fate of the world.

Back in the room, Marcus Chalfen begins to introduce his mentor, one of the men seated next to him. Archie wonders who his own mentor is, and he settles on Samad, since he can't imagine making decisions without him. Marcus names his mentor as "Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret," and Archie recognizes the name faintly. He sees Millat looking uneasy in the crowd, and he notices that Dr. Perret, seated next to Marcus, is weeping "tiny tears of pride"—red tears. Samad reenters the room and recognizes the doctor; suddenly, he realizes that Archie has lied to him for 50. He turns to Archie and begins to curse in the Bengali vernacular.

Marcus's mentor is revealed to be Dr. Perret, the doctor Samad thought Archie killed at the end of World War II. A long-forgotten part of history has reemerged suddenly, thrusting the two men back into a murky past, and showing that the past is never truly resolved.

Millat is "reaching like Pande" for his gun, and Archie stands up. With no coin to help him, he runs forward, placing himself "between Millat Iqbal's decision and his target, like the moment between thought and speech." In a flashback, Archie and Dr. Perret are walking through the flatlands; Archie has been tasked with killing the doctor. Archie begins to feel sorry for Dr. Perret, and he offers him a cigarette as a last request. Dr. Perret tries to reason with Archie, telling him that if he kills him, the decision will be "repeated again and again, through eternity." Archie decides to flip a coin: if it is heads, he will kill the doctor, and if it is tails, he will spare him. The coin falls behind him, and as he bends to pick it up, the doctor shoots him in the thigh. He turns around and shows the doctor the coin, which has landed on tails. Back in the present, Archie takes the bullet from Millat's gun in the thigh and falls down through the mouse's glass display box.

Archie spares Dr. Perret's life for the second time, repeating history: at the same time, Millat repeats history by failing to fire a "heroic" shot, like Mangal Pande (Millat believes the act is heroic because he is aiming at Marcus Chalfen). Dr. Perret's words to Archie in the past—though clearly a desperate attempt to survive—seem to hold true, since Archie's decision not to kill Dr. Perret is also repeated "again and again," through history.

The narrator then takes over the story, saying that this end is "simply the beginning of an even longer story" that "the same focus group who picked out the color of this room" will probably want to see played out. Eyewitnesses were unable to identify the culprit of the shooting at the Institute as either Magid or Millat, so both are given community service, working as gardeners in Joyce's new project, a huge millennial park by the banks of the Thames. Some people, especially young women, might want to know about Irie, Joshua, and Hortense, who are sitting by a Caribbean sea in 2000: Joshua and Irie are lovers, and Irie's daughter writes postcards to her "uncles," Millat and Magid. Meanwhile, on December 31, 1999, Samad, Archie, Alsana, and Clara are playing blackjack in O'Connell's, which has finally opened its doors to women; the narrator says that it is "largely the criminal class and the elderly" who find themselves interested in this part of the story.

The narrator concludes the story by framing the characters' narratives in terms of the "focus groups" most interested in them. Though the narrator sorts out and separates the identity groups who would like to see the different characters' stories played out, the Iqbal, Jones, and Chalfen families have all intermingled, suggesting that contemporary British society is not easily divided into discrete demographic categories. Ultimately, the novel advances a cautiously optimistic image of racial harmony, showing the families at peace—despite their many differences and complicated cultural backgrounds.

The narrator concludes by saying that telling these concluding tales would be to "speed the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect," which Archie knows isn't true. Back in the present, some onlookers are watching Archie bleeding on the **FutureMouse** cage, while others are watching the small brown mouse run away from the scene. Archie, too, watches the mouse, thinking, "*Go on my son!*"

The novel finishes by racing back into the past, which always exercises control over the present, demonstrating that the future is not "perfect" but rather a product of a complicated, intricate, and flawed history.

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