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Monica Ali and Zadie Smith, Contemporary Approach to Ethnic Literature

Monica Ali a Zadie Smith, současný přístup k etnické literatuře

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Abstract

The subject matter of this thesis is to analyse novels N-W by Zadie Smith and Brick Lane by Monica Ali in context of post-colonial literature. The theoretical part is concerned with post-colonialism, ethnicity and post-colonial writers. The bachelor thesis focuses mainly on the interpretation of the characters and the environment in the fictions. The approaches of Zadie Smith and Monica Ali are analysed and compared.

Anotace

Práce se zabývá analýzou románů Severozápad od Zadie Smith a Ve čtvrti Brick Lane od Moniky Ali v kontextu postkoloniální literatury. Teoretická část práce je věnována postkolonialismu, etnicitě a postkoloniálním autorům. Práce je zaměřena na interpretaci postav a prostředí obou románů. Přístupy autorek Zadie Smith a Moniky Ali jsou analyzovány a porovnány.

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1 Introduction

This thesis is concerned with post-colonial literature, two post-colonial writers Zadie Smith and Monica Ali and their novels. The characters and the environment in both books are analysed and the approaches of Zadie Smith and Monica Ali are compared.

As for post-colonialism, the era, which preceded times of post-colonialism, cannot be omitted - this is why colonialism will be mentioned at first. In connection with Great Britain colonialism might be symbolized by the British Empire and Queen Victoria.

The British Empire, with its area about 36,6 millions km² in 1921, has been the largest colonial empire ever. Queen Victoria (ruling from 1837 to 1901) was the most powerful woman at that time and the British Empire ruled all oceans. Evidently, most of the people living nowadays have had their lives connected with the experience of colonialism. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2002: 1)

According to Storry and Childs there is around 20 per cent of total population (12 million people) in the United Kingdom who have no "straightforward relationship with the political state in which they live." (Storry, Childs 2007: 210) It has led into problematic relationship between the state and minorities living in the United Kingdom. As Maxmilian Schell says in *Kampf um die Weltmacht*: "Colonialism was overcome but its consequences were not."

The influence of immigrants varies from their impact on language to their participation in English culture. Newcomers are not the concern of

politics exclusively, because there are not only economical and political issues connected with immigrants. They are a part of the present-day culture of Great Britain, as both Monica Ali and Zadie Smith can prove. Another aspect, which attracts the attention of linguists, is the language of immigrants and its impact on modern English.

These two features - cultural and linguistic consequences of immigration, are not concerns of this thesis. This work focuses on the interpretation of the characters and the fictional place of novel *N-W* and *Brick Lane* in context of post-colonial literature and ethnicity.

2 Post-colonialism and Ethnicity

This chapter deals with the essential terms of this thesis - post-colonialism and ethnicity. First of all, these two basic terms will be described and then the term post-colonial state will be analysed.

2.1 Post-colonialism

The term 'post-colonial' is used to refer to the effects of colonization on people, their lives and their culture. First, after the Second World War the post-colonial state used to have another meaning than it has today. It had a chronological meaning, whereas from the late 1970's literary critics have been using this term to debate the diverse cultural effects of colonization. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2009: 168)

The distinction between 'colonial era' and 'post-colonial era' meaning before and after independence of colonized countries might be misleading. The term 'post-colonial' is used to describe the whole cultures influenced by the imperial power - with its continuity from the colonization until present day. There can be still found people using the term 'post-colonial' referring to something 'anti-colonial' or using it as a synonym with 'post-independence' which are definitely wrong usages of this term. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2009: 2)

2.2 Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a term closely connected with modern world, post-colonialism and multiculturalism. Many people have used it frequently in recent years. What does it mean actually?

In general, ethnicity is "a sense of peoplehood or nationhood that is culturally transmitted"¹ When we speak about "human variation in terms of culture, tradition, language, social patterns and ancestry", then the term ethnicity is used. This term does not generalize race into "fixed, genetically determined biological types." (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2009: 75) Another definition might be taken from Storry and Childs who describe ethnicity as "the patterns of social behaviour, cultural values, and genealogical affiliations shared by certain individuals who come together to form a group within a larger population." (Storry, Childs: 209)

Ethnicity is one of the terms that is apparently linked to the post-colonial literature. All characters in novels by Zadie Smith and Monica Ali are searching for their true identity and ethnical background is probably one of the most determining factors.

2.3 Post-colonial State

In this subhead a post-colonial state is described. Historians, economists and political theorists have been using the term 'post-colonial state' or 'post-colonial nation' to talk about state or nation after its separation from the imperial power. It cannot be expected that after declaration of independence the newly formed state becomes fully independent on its former colonizer, naturally. New post-colonial states have been strongly affected by administrative, legal and economic system of the former European powers, as well as by its language,

¹ Questions on Ethnicity. In: *Sociology Guide* [online]. © 2015 [q. 2015-04-16]. Available from: <http://www.sociologyguide.com/questions/ethnicity.php>

trade etc. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2009: 174-175)

3 Post-colonial Literature

After descriptions of post-colonialism, ethnicity and post-colonial state, post-colonial literature is characterized. First of all, post-colonial literature and its meaning is described. Later the development of post-colonial literatures is represented as well. A short introduction to the post-colonial novelists Zadie Smith and Monica Ali is included.

3.1 What is Post-colonial Literature

Obviously writing by authors who were colonized by European imperial powers is considered as post-colonial literature. As it is mentioned above, the term 'post-colonial' cannot be narrowed only to the time after colonialism. It is important to become aware that post-colonial literature has been affected by both periods - during and after European imperial domination.

What is typical or special about these literary texts? Beyond their unusual regional characteristics it is that "they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power." By their emphasis on being different from the expectations of the imperial power, these literatures can be distinguished as post-colonial. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2002: 2)

The search for ethnic identity (or denying it) is one of the features of the narrative of Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. Evidently, all their characters (or their ancestors) were brought to London because of colonialism.

3.2 Development of Post-colonial Literature

Post-colonial literature has not been the same all the time. It has been changing and developing through several stages. These stages, according to Ashcroft et al., "can be seen to correspond to stages both of national or regional consciousness and of the project of asserting difference from the imperial centre."

First of all, a literate elite wrote in the language of the imperial centre, mostly 'representatives' of the colonizing power wrote first texts. Naturally, these writers identified with the imperial centre. Even though these texts cannot be integrated with the culture of colonized inhabitants, it still provides detailed descriptions of landscape, custom and language of this certain culture.

The second step of writing within the development of the post-colonial is, as claimed by Ashcroft et al., "the literature produced 'under imperial licence' by 'natives' or 'outcasts'." Evidently, these texts were written with the help and the assistance of the superintendent. Literature in the colonized territory was directly controlled by the imperial ruling class.

Independent literatures have been dependent on the freedom from the controlling power and "the appropriation of language and writing for new and distinctive usage." According to Ashcroft et al. this "appropriation is clearly the most significant feature in the emergence of modern post-colonial literatures." (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2002: 5-6)

3.3 Post-colonial Writers

In this thesis writing by those people who were formerly colonized by Britain or by other European countries is called post-colonial literature. It is definitely hardly possible to write a whole list of all post-colonial

writers. Anthony Burgess, Kazuo Ishiguro, Hanif Kureishi, Graham Swift, Salman Rushdie, Rudyard Kipling, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali might be only examples of post-colonial writers.² Last two authors mentioned above are described in the following paragraphs. Later on, their fictions are analysed in context of post-colonialism and its features.

3.3.1 Zadie Smith

Zadie Smith was born in North London in 1975. Her father comes from England and her mother is from Jamaica.³ She studied at Cambridge University and graduated in 1997. Zadie Smith has written several novels, e.g. *White teeth* (2000), *The Autograph Man* (2002), *On Beauty* (2005), *N-W* (2012); her other works are, for instance, *Piece of Flesh* (2001), a non-fiction book about writing *Fail Better* (2006); and *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (2009).

Several books written by Zadie Smith won a number of prizes and awards. Zadie Smith was nominated in 2002 by *Granta* magazine as one of 20 'Best of Young British Novelists' and in 2010 she became a tenured professor of fiction at New York University.⁴

² Postcolonial Literature. In: *Literary History* [online]. © 1998-2014 [q. 2014-11-26]. Available from: <http://www.literaryhistory.com/20thC/Groups/postcolonial.htm>

³ This feature appears in her books - one parent 'white' and the second one 'black'.

⁴ Writers: Monica Ali. In: *British Council Literature* [online]. © 2011 [q. 2014-11-27]. Available from: <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/monica-ali>

For the reason that the fiction N-W (2012) is rather exceptional for its postmodern style of writing, this novel will be analysed.

3.3.2 Monica Ali

Monica Ali was born in Dhaka (Bangladesh) in 1967 to an English mother and a Bangladeshi father. Her parents moved to England when she was three-years old. She studied at Oxford University and she has produced four books until now - *Brick Lane* (2003), *Alentejo Blue* (2006), *In the Kitchen* (2009) and *Untold Story* (2011). According to British Council Literature "Monica Ali lives in London and was named in 2003 by *Granta* magazine as one of twenty 'Best of Young British Novelists'."⁵ In this thesis the first work of Monica Ali called *Brick Lane* (2003) is analysed.

⁵ Writers: Monica Ali. In: *British Council Literature* [online]. © 2011 [q. 2014-11-27]. Available from: <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/monica-ali>

4 Character Analysis in Novels by Zadie Smith and Monica Ali

In this chapter and its subheads the characters in *N-W* by Zadie Smith and *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali are analysed in the context of post-colonial studies. The aim of this chapter is to describe multicultural world of present-day London in Zadie Smith's novel called *N-W* and in Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane*. As there might appear different points of view, a certain comparison of these two authors and their approaches is mentioned.

4.1 Female Characters

The situation of women in post-colonial literature is described in this subhead. This topic is more complicated and complex as it is definitely linked to other aspects of post-colonialism like religion or the origin of the characters.

4.1.1 Female Characters in *N-W* by Zadie Smith

First of all, the main heroines of Zadie Smith's novel *N-W* are analysed. The main characters of this novel are four Londoners - Leah, Keisha (renamed Nathalie), Felix and Nathan who all grew up in Caldwell, a Willesden council estate.⁶ The male heroes and their lives will be analysed in another chapter. *N-W*, which portrays the urban life in

⁶ Compared to the other novels like *On Beauty* or *White Teeth*, where the main characters are only women.

North-West London, uncovers the life stories of these four people. The book is divided into five sections - the first one is Leah's.

4.1.1.1 Leah Hanwell

Leah describes herself as the only white woman on the local council's lottery fund distribution team; her ancestors are Irish and English. This is not the only mixture of cultures in her life - her husband is half Algerian, half Guadeloupian; her best friend is first-generation Caribbean; and her friend's husband is half Italian, half Trinidadian.

Leah's status as a wife might seem to be fulfilled, but in fact Leah has to deal with many difficulties in her marriage. The problem is that Leah wants to stay forever 18 and to her husband's disappointment she does not want to have children. Time is what troubles Leah the most. She observes how time passes and how other people are affected by it. Her thoughts can be caught in following quotation:

"In the end, only one idea reliably retained: time as a relative experience, different for the jogger, the lover, the tortured, the leisured. Like right now, when a minute seems to stretch itself into an hour."

(Smith 2012: 33)

Leah does not want to admit that she is getting older and that she cannot stay forever 18. She does not know how to fulfil her status as an adult. As it is mentioned later, Leah is not the only character who witnesses the cruelty and uncontrollability of time.

Another aspect of Leah's life, which is controversial, is her sexuality. "It is as though she cannot find the edges of herself. Her sexuality is fluid,

and she is porous to spiritual experience."⁷ Although she is married, she is attracted to a woman and she finds herself almost mixed up with her. Later on the readers find out that Leah's bisexuality is true. Keisha describes one of the scenes:

"... one hand over the back of the couch, another on Alice's knee, breathing on the girls lovely neck, Nathalie Blake had seen Leah do this many times, but with boys, and there had always seemed something a little shocking and perverse in it, whereas here the relation looked natural."

(Smith 2012: 210)

Leah's sexual life is not only about her bisexuality, but also about the intensive sexual connection between her and her husband. The beginning of their relationship was unusual, unconventional. As Smith points out (N-W, 2012: 22): she had got pregnant before their marriage, they had got married before they got friends, he had washed her hair before he talked to her, they had made love before they found out the surname of each other, they tried anal sex before they had vaginal sex.

Although Zadie Smith's sense of humor, her ability to describe anything straightforward may be far too exaggerated for some readers, these are the features that astonish the readers the most.

⁷ ENRIGHT, Anne. Mind the Gap: 'NW,' by Zadie Smith. In: *The New York Times* [online]. September 21, 2012 [q. 2015-04-20]. Available from: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/books/review/nw-by-zadie-smith.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1

Leah's position in the novel N-W can be expressed in three terms: philosophical thoughts about parallel worlds, questions of time and stillness. Although Keisha (Leah's best friend) describes Leah as a generous and kind person, her personality and her life is much more complicated than this simplified characteristic.

4.1.1.2 Keisha (Nathalie) Blake

The other female character in N-W is called Keisha (renamed Nathalie), a friend of Leah's. Her life-story is divided into 184 parts⁸. Readers can follow the tale of the friendship with all ups and downs.

Keisha is looking for her authenticity, The section called *In drag* shows her inner troubles:

"Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic."

(Smith 2012: 282)

This quotation displays Keisha's search for her true identity, for the authenticity of her life. Keisha does not know who she actually is, she seems to be confused and lost in her own life. Although the topic of growing up, becoming an adult definitely belongs to the serious themes, the author plays with the reader and uses irony and sarcasm to

⁸ That makes Keisha's part the longest one.

describe this part of Keisha's life. The following extract can show the humorous part:

"It did not strike Keisha Blake that such feelings of alienation are the banal fate of adolescents everywhere. She considered herself peculiarly afflicted, and it is not an exaggeration to say that she struggled to think of anyone besides perhaps James Baldwin and Jesus who had experienced the profound isolation and loneliness..."

(Smith, 2012: 194)

There is no doubt that Zadie Smith can definitely make the readers feel that the characters are really close to their own reality.

As the story is developing, Keisha herself realizes that there is striking difference between her and Leah. Not only her willfulness, but also her urge to know, to understand, to learn, to explain shows how dissimilar these two women are. One of the examples of their different points of view can be seen when Keisha shows her new flat to Leah - for Leah it is an incredibly huge apartment and she admires that Keisha can be the owner of it. Keisha does not seem to be so enthusiastic about her own flat. This displays the social status and lifestyle dissimilarity between them.

Although Keisha is the one who is always explaining, reading leaflets and searching in books, she struggles to understand both herself and the world around her. It might seem that while she is living her life, she keeps trying to figure out what it is all about and how to become a mature adult. Neither her children bring her the right feelings of transcendence and fulfillment.

Concerning Keisha's position at her job as a barrister, she "just wants her work to be taken on its own merits..." (Smith, 2012: 241). The situation of women in fields of advocacy is not easy. Being an interloper among the judges can be hardly a neutral position. As Keisha wants to be respected (and no promotion appears), she tries to persuade both herself and people around her that it is a matter of the ethics of law, of strong morality and indifference to money. At the same time, she desires to secure her future and get matured. What does not help Keisha at all is the fact that her colleagues find Caldwell, a home of both Leah and Keisha, as a place of hopelessness, "analogous to a war zone" (Smith, 2012: 249). Despite Keisha's willfulness and intelligence, the progress in her profession remains slow and complicated.

The following extract displays Keisha's ambiguity in terms of her attitude to work: "Work suited her,..., she could not hide her enthusiasm for Monday mornings. She could only justify herself to herself when she worked." (Smith, 2012:256) Although she cannot imagine her life without her work, she cannot find any satisfaction in it either.

Despite the fact that Keisha was able to change her social status via education and her profession, her roots and poverty connected with that still vex her - her family living in penury, "hand to mouth". Apparently, Keisha "can't stand them living like that" (Smith, 2012: 252).

The difference between women and men according to Keisha (when she visits her brother Jayden) is described in the following extract:

"Nathalie realized that there was no special or chosen man in this house. ... If it was not quite possible to feel happy for him it was because the arrangement was timeless - it did not come bound by the constrictions of time - and this in turn was the

consequence of a crucial detail: no woman were included within the schema. Women were bearing time. Nathalie brought time into this house."

(Smith, 2012: 268)

As stated by Keisha, women cannot stop mentioning the time, they cannot stop worrying about it. Smith describes it as 'force of nature' - that is how the title is called.

4.1.1.2.1 Keisha or Nathalie?

Keisha changes her name to Nathalie before she gains qualifications for a barrister. Why does she do so? As it is mentioned above, Keisha is searching for her identity and she lives two lives - first of all, she is still the black girl who grew up in poor conditions, but with education and the change of environment she must deal with her new position in the society of advocates.

Before graduating and before her marriage, Keisha renames herself Nathalie. She uses this name for her colleagues, her new acquaintances and her husband Francesco. Only for her family and Leah she remains to be called Keisha. Nathalie uses her old name for the advertisements on the Internet, which is why her 'customers' call her Keisha.

Obviously, Nathalie is the mother of two children, the wife and the hard-working barrister and Keisha is the black woman smoking marijuana with her one-time friends, Keisha who is proposing a threesome on the Internet. As Nathalie's life becomes more and more empty, she "ends

up wandering the streets with Nathan, a shady classmate from Brayton."⁹ And that is the moment when she becomes Keisha again.

To sum up, the personal characteristics of both female heroines (as well as of the other characters in the book) cannot be described in simple words, because these characters are very complicated, the text is written non-chronologically, several people tell the stories, the connections and consequences remain unknown till the end of the book.

4.1.1.3 Female Character in Brick Lane by Monica Ali

This subhead deals with the characteristics and position of the main heroine in the book Brick Lane - a young Bangladeshi woman living in Brick Lane, Nazneen. After having moved to England as a bride of 40-year-old Chanu, she works as a "garment worker stitching zippers and buttons in her public housing flat"¹⁰. Nazneen cannot speak English and her husband does not see any need for her to try. The social status of Nazneen as an immigrant-woman is closely connected with her feeling of alienation and isolation.

⁹ ENRIGHT, Anne. Mind the Gap: 'NW,' by Zadie Smith. In: *The New York Times* [online]. September 21, 2012 [q. 2015-04-20]. Available from: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/books/review/nw-by-zadie-smith.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1

¹⁰ GORRA, Michael. East Enders. In: *The New York Times* [online]. September 7, 2003 [q. 2015-03-31]. Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/07/books/east-enders.html?pagewanted=1>

It is no surprise that Nazneen's everyday life is full of loneliness and boring stereotype daily routines. She knows only the flat and the closest surroundings. When going out, she goes always along with her husband.

Her life experience is not influenced only by her religion - Islam, but she can also compare her own life to her sister's who lives in Bangladesh on her own. Not only Nazneen, but also her two daughters and her best friend Razia have to face the difficulties and the 'fate' of being a woman in an immigrant Muslim community.

The extract shows Nazneen's way of going through her life. This excerpt is taken from the beginning of the novel and it describes the birth of Nazneen.

"But Rupban, who could not stop crying, held her daughter to her breast and shook her head. 'No,' she said, 'we must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate. That way, she will be stronger.'"

(Ali, 2004: 14)

Evidently, a mother of Nazneen, Rupban, brought her up in belief that her daughter should not fight against what is happening to her. This is how Nazneen accepts anything that life brings to her.

At the moment when Nazneen's first child, Raqib, dies, she does not know how to handle it. She only accepts the "way of Fate". When speaking of the preparation for burial, her thoughts are expressed by: "Yes, she would wash him. She brought him in and she would take him

out." (Ali, 2007: 145) Nazneen does not allow herself to express her deep loss; her sole activities are connected with household.

Nazneen's immaturity, her naivety and her ways of thinking change as the plot goes on. The relationship between Nazneen and her husband Chanu, with whom she has two daughters, undergoes a change as well. Although the reader might even feel sorry for Nazneen and her life, she is the one who finally decides.

One of the main challenges for Nazneen comes with her lover Karim, especially when her husband comes to a decision to move back to Bangladesh. Despite of Nazneen's obedience and her moral expectations, she is physically attracted to Karim, who comes to her house everyday, bringing her items to sew. Suddenly it is Nazneen who must confront the reality with all consequences.

Nazneen's daughters play important roles in the narrative in terms of the influence of Anglo-Saxon culture on young generation. Evidently, youngsters have the opportunity to live completely different lives than their parents. It is apparent not only in the way they dress, but also in the ways they think and behave. The daughters of Nazneen can speak English; they open the world of present-day London to their mother.

All in all, Nazneen, except for her final decision, passively accepts everything what life brings. Her thoughts are full of fears and she does not express her feelings. It is not easy to judge her, because who knows what it must be like to live an oppressed life as a Muslim woman. Possibly, Ali wanted to show that Nazneen's mother was right when she said that to passively tolerate the fate makes one stronger.

4.2 Male Characters

This chapter is concerned with the analysis of male heroes in fictions *N-W* and *Brick Lane*. The role of men is not as dominant as the role of women. Their personalities are not examined in such detail as women are.

4.2.1 Male Characters in *N-W* by Zadie Smith

As for the situation of men in novel *N-W*, there are two main heroes: Felix and Nathan. Their stories (or at least some parts of them) are mainly described in the second and in the fourth part of the novel. The husbands of main heroines cannot be omitted either.

4.2.1.1 Felix Cooper

Felix, a Caribbean Londoner, is on the way to the West End. As he is travelling, readers get to know the places he passes by. Felix meets a young guy Tom who wants to sell his car. Tom shocked that the potential buyer is black, asks Felix for weed. One of the best moments of the whole novel comes when Felix visits his ex-lover Annie. This part is analysed in more details in chapter concerning sexuality and intimacy.

Felix's section describes "Felix's roller coaster ride through London life - adventure, drugs, descent, and a sense of mission."¹¹ His family background is illustrated by his parents: Felix's father has a bad

¹¹ THOMAS, Philippa. Zadie Smith: 'NW' - 2012. In: *London Fictions* [online]. October 2012 [q. 2015-03-31]. Available from: <http://www.londonfictions.com/zadie-smith-nw.html>

reputation; his mother leaves them when Felix is a little boy. Readers get to know also Felix's present situation with all his dreams about future. The story of Felix is expressed in such a way that "the past makes sense of the present"¹².

Felix is the one who has gone through tough life situations, but was able to get out of it. At the moment readers meet Felix, he is not addicted to drugs anymore, he wants to marry his girlfriend, his future seems to be brighter than anything else that happened before. His way of thinking is rather positive and he is full of hope.

The way in which other people look at Felix is evident in the fact that his girlfriend is persuaded that he has got "an invisible tattoo on his forehead: PLEASE AS ME FOR WEED" (Smith, 2012: 132). It is the Felix's story that shocks the most - as Felix completely changes his life and his attitude towards himself; he seems to be the lucky one at the beginning. Finally, his life is lost because of the colour of his skin. Readers might feel only pity for him. After reading Felix's section, it is time to put the book aside and wait until you forget the author that she killed the only hopeful person in the book. One might feel that life is truly not fair at all.

What makes Felix exceptional is that he does not relate to the other characters, he does not know them and other characters happen to

¹² ENRIGHT, Anne. Mind the Gap: 'NW,' by Zadie Smith. In: *The New York Times* [online]. September 21, 2012 [q. 2015-04-11]. Available from: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/books/review/nw-by-zadie-smith.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1

know him only because of his death. Only at the end of the novel, readers are given the idea that Nathan was the one who murdered Felix.

4.2.1.2 Nathan Bogle

The section dealing with the story of Nathan Bogle is the shortest one, but Nathan appears in other parts as well. He is especially Keisha and Leah's topic. Leah once obsessively adored Nathan, for instance. He grew up with words of his mother on his mind: "Everybody loves up a bredrin when he's ten. All cute and lively. Everyone loves a bredrin when he's ten. After that he's a problem. Can't stay ten always." (Smith, 2012: 317) Nathan's point of view is expressed in the declaration: "There's no way to live in this country when you're grown. Not at all. They don't want you, your own people don't want you, no one wants you. Ain't the same for girls, it's a man ting." (Smith, 2012: 317)

Once adored by girls, once good at playing football, Nathan becomes a junkie living on street, rejected by everybody. All Nathan cares about is his survival.

4.2.1.3 Michel and Francesco De Angelis

Michel, French Algerian, is the husband of Leah's. He has had dreams and he has fulfilled some of them: he got married, he moved from a council flat into a real flat. Michel's another step in his life is clear - to have a baby. And that is the point, where Leah cannot move on. Michel tries to understand his wife, but he will never be able to accept that Leah does not want the same as her husband.

Francesco De Angelis is the husband of Keisha (Nathalie), looking "like he was born on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean and raised by

Ralph Lauren" (Smith, 2012: 207). He is well-educated, loving husband, who supports only Nathalie - never Keisha. Maybe he does not want to admit, that his wife is still partly Keisha.

Partners of main heroines are only parts of Leah and Keisha's sections; their roles are marginal. Both Michel and Francesco try to support their partners, but they struggle to understand them. In fact, they hardly know who they are.

4.2.2 Male Characters in Brick Lane by Monica Ali

This subhead deals with the heroes Chanu, a husband of Nazneen, and Karim, a lover of hers. The only thing that connects these two men is their belief, but each of them practices it in a different way.

4.2.2.1 Chanu

Chanu is an older man with interest in reading and planning what he could do. However, he almost never achieves his ambitions, his belief is skin-deep. Although Chanu says Nazneen should be grateful for having him as her husband (their marriage was arranged as for the tradition) because of his education and non-conservative opinions, the opposite is the truth. Nazneen struggles to do her duty to her husband, she cannot stand his exaggerated ideas that never come true.

Chanu seems to be unable to take care of his wife and his daughters. His desire for going back to Bangladesh separates him from them even more. The picture of Chanu as a man must make every woman disgusted - not only his large stomach, but also the description of Nazneen cutting his hairs and nails make the picture of him really vivid. It further illustrates the submission of a Muslim woman to her husband. Despite of this fact, Nazneen patiently accepts her husband. She gets

used to her situation, until she becomes aware of a young radical, Karim.

4.2.2.2 Karim

Karim, compared to Chanu, is an extremely active Islamist; he is a part of a radical movement 'Bengal Tigers'. Karim is absolutely attracted to Nazneen, his life is full of action, vibrant speeches and radical issues.

Readers cannot leave unnoticed the fact that Karim is described as a handsome guy with charisma. He differs from Nazneen's husband in so many ways, that it is no surprise that she falls in love with him. Although it might seem that Karim is the reason for Nazneen's final decision, the book does not end with 'they lived happily ever after'. While Chanu moves back to Bangladesh, Nazneen with her daughters stay in London. Nazneen ends the relationship with Karim for the sake of her own independence and stability.

All in all, male characters represent the Islamic faith - both radical and stereotypical. Their roles evidently symbolize two ways of living: an active and passive lifestyle. The position between these two men brings several moral and ethical issues into Nazneen's life - marriage vs. love, responsibility vs. freedom, being a lover in an Islamic society vs. being a mother and a wife at the same time.

5 Analysis of Place in Novels by Zadie Smith and Monica Ali

This chapter is concerned with the analysis of the environment in fictional works *N-W* and *Brick Lane*. The features of post-colonial literatures are pointed out in context of these two novels. As the styles of writing of the authors differ, the major dissimilarities are identified as well.

5.1 Origins of Characters

First subhead deals with the origins of the characters in the above-mentioned novels. Both authors tell us stories of immigrants, their families or their descendants.

Monica Ali concentrates mostly on a sole character - Nazneen, who comes from Bangladesh and moves to England because of her arranged marriage. In comparison with Zadie Smith's characters, readers are well informed about Nazneen's childhood in Bangladesh.

What makes the story special are the letters sent by a sister of Nazneen, Hasina. Hasina lives in Bangladesh on her own, which is rather difficult in Bangladeshi society.

The number of characters in *N-W* is much larger; therefore numerous places of origin, many perspectives and a lot of cultures appear in this novel. For instance, there are immigrants from Ireland, Algeria, Guadeloupe, Caribbean, Italy, Trinidad, etc. This fact makes this book unusually colourful and bright - many people with different social status, various family backgrounds, diverse origins.

All heroes and heroines in both novels have to deal with their positions of immigrants in London. Each of them finds their ways to face it. Nazneen tries to fight for her own independence without destroying her morals. Leah, in spite of being a white woman, is surrounded by people of various origins. She has lived in Caldwell all her life and she is definitely a part of this community. Her friend Keisha has to cope with her position as a black woman both at home and at work. Felix becomes a victim of crime because of the colour of his skin. Nathan believes that it is the race that does not give a grown black man any chance in life.

5.2 Place

Both authors called their books according to a place where the action takes place. Both *N-W* and *Brick Lane* refer to the location of the plots in their titles.

5.2.1 North-West London

N-W means North-West London that is famous for its "engaging mix of cultures, classes and attractions"¹³. In spite of the fact that the title of the book refers to North-West London, Smith focuses mainly on Willesden. Although the setting is fictional, it is ????. Several

¹³ TISDALL, Nigel. North-West London City Break Guide. In: *The Telegraph* [online]. ©2012 [q. 2015-03-23]. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destination/uk/england/london/56607/North-west-London-city-break-guide.html>

subchapters are named after real streets that indicate the streets and places the characters pass.

The location has a great influence on the narrative and on the way heroes think and behave. Obviously, there are significant differences between the communities in terms of their values and social status. The whole place is full of diverse types of people - it varies from the junkie living on a street who is capable of murder to advocates debating on politics.

5.2.2 Brick Lane

Brick Lane, a street located in East London, is a center of the Bangladeshi-Sylheti community. Brick Lane is not set only in London, but also in Bangladesh, where the story begins and from where Hasina's letters come.

After moving to London, mostly the flat determines the setting of Brick Lane. Nazneen's entire life in London is linked to the apartment, except shopping at a local market where her husband accompanies her. The daughters of Nazneen are the only source of information about life outside Nazneen's world.

The fact that the place in Brick Lane is rather limited is determined by the religion. Monica Ali describes a life of an oppressed woman and that is why the whole atmosphere feels so gloomy. Although readers can find some moments that brighten the story or some amusing situations, the entire atmosphere remains upsetting. There is no doubt about the heroine's progress in terms of independence, but she still has a lot to discover and improve.

The point that the authors have in common is the fact that they both link the stories to actual events. Especially the situation after September 11 attacks is well illustrated in Brick Lane. The marches of radical Islamists are well demonstrated as well.

Compared to Brick Lane, all characters in N-W are free; they can go anywhere they want. Many points of view allow the readers to imagine the diversity of such place like N-W. The characters of N-W are not comparable to those in Brick Lane - especially for their freedom.

5.3 Style of Writing

This subhead deals with the style of writing that Zadie Smith and Monica Ali use. In terms of their approaches, these two authors are absolutely contrasting. Zadie Smith is said be a representative of so-called hysterical realism, N-W is a fiction belonging to Postmodern Literature. Monica Ali's novel is considered as a 'Bildungsroman'. These two approaches are analysed and compared.

5.3.1 Hysterical Realism

It was a literary critic James Wood who has used and defined the term 'hysterical realism'. James Wood says: "Storytelling has become a kind of grammar in these novels; it is how they structure and drive themselves on. The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, and

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themselves on. The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, and overworked."¹⁴ He admits, that Zadie Smith has more than enough of innovative ideas (or even too much of them). Wood asks himself, whether literature is about talking about life or about giving a performance. For those, who would like to classify Smith, he adds: "As realism, it is incredible; as satire, it is cartoonish; as cartoon, it is too realistic. Smith is a frustrating writer, for she has a natural comic gift, and yet is willing to let passages of her book descend into cartoonishness and a kind of itchy, restless extremism."¹⁵ Obviously, James Wood is not a fan of contemporary literature (including Zadie Smith). According to this literacy critic, modern novelists are unsuccessful in fulfilling what is expected from novels - "representing human beings"¹⁶

5.3.1.1N-W as an Example of Post-modern Literature

As N-W belongs to a post-modern type of literature, there are many features of post-modernism applied. First of all, both first and third person narrator is put to use, the narrative is very often interrupted by a

¹⁴ WOOD, James. James Woods' Classic Takedown of Faux-Dickensian 'Hysterical Realism'. In: *New Republic* [online]. August 14, 2014 [q. 2015-04-22]. Available from: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-all-too-inhuman>

¹⁵ see 14

¹⁶ GROSSMAN, Lev. What Ever Happened to Hysterical Realism?. In: *Time* [online]. July 11, 2012 [q. 2015-04-22]. Available from: <http://entertainment.time.com/2012/07/11/what-ever-happened-to-hysterical-realism/>

stream-of-consciousness. The techniques of writing vary from screenplay style dialogue to texts written in shape of a mouth or a tree, for example. Furthermore, the timeline is non-chronological; the reality is mixed up with memories.

The dominant motif - time - have an effect on the whole narrative of N-W. Everything is accelerated; readers are given clues in the titles of sections to understand their messages.

Another typical feature of Smith's books in general is her sense of humour. It is the humour that makes all her books vivid. In spite of the serious problem that the characters have to handle, the whole spirit of the novels is - thanks to the comical aspects, very cheerful and bright.

5.3.2 Brick Lane as an Example of Coming-of-Age Novel

According to literary criticism, a coming-of-age novel¹⁷, originally called a 'bildungsroman', is a type of novel "that deals with the maturation process, with how and why the protagonist develops as he does, both morally and psychologically." Originally, the expression *bildungsroman* means "novel of education" or "novel of formation".¹⁸

¹⁷ also known as novels of formation or formation or culture

¹⁸ Bildungsroman: German Literary Genre. In: *Encyclopedia Britannica* [online]. © 2015 [q. 2015-04-11]. Available from: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/65244/bildungsroman>

As mentioned above, Nazneen's story begins at the moment of her birth and it continues till her partial emancipation. Nazneen undergoes many changes; she slowly becomes mature and more independent. Her transformation varies from naivety to self-consciousness, from obedience to independence. Although this process is rather slow-going, Nazneen is a completely different person than she used to be at the beginning.

By contrast to N-W, the narrative of Brick Lane is rather traditional - chronological point of view, no experiment with words. Only letters from the sister of Nazneen interrupt the usual way of writing. These letters are important to the narrative because of the language. Evidently, Hasina's language is on much lower level. She makes mistakes in grammar, vocabulary and spelling. Following extract displays Hasina's language:

"How to write? What to tell? Sister I have bring shame on self. Hide this letter from your husband. I tell you what happen. If you write to me even in spite you know what I have done it not because I trick you to think I am good person."

(Ali, 2004: 165)

Apparently, the language proficiency of Hasina is on a low level - missing articles and punctuation, wrong usage of tenses and grammatical mistakes. The poorness of Hasina's writing corresponds to the poverty in which she lives.

Language is definitely a matter of the status of the characters. This is one of the features that N-W and Brick Lane have in common. They both show the connection between language and social status.

5.4 Sexuality and Intimacy

This subhead deals with the topics of sexual orientation and intimacy. In terms of sexual issues, novels *N-W* and *Brick Lane* completely differ.

First of all, the heroines in *Brick Lane* are closely determined by their religion and the narrative corresponds to this obedience. When speaking about anything intimate, the readers can only find out that "she was more than naked" (Ali, 2004: 343). Even when Hasina describes what has happened to her or how men treat her, it is always written between the lines, never directly. She writes, for example: "He put lamp down and he starting to take off shirt. He quiet and I glad for it. Then he take off trousers. I say nothing I do nothing and then it done and he sit in the chair. He tell me not to cry and I stop." (Ali, 2004:165-166) Later on, Hasina adds: "He comes every week. Sometimes he comes twice." (Ali, 2004: 167)

Obviously Nazneen cannot speak her mind. For instance when Nazneen, being pregnant, goes to her doctor (who is her husband's friend), she does not tell him about her health problems. Despite of horrible pain while urination, Nazneen does not mention it in front of her doctor. She is persuaded that there is no point in bothering the doctor with her problems. She does not see any reason for talking openly with anybody, and especially with men.

On the other hand, the narrative of *N-W* is completely open. Zadie Smith does not hesitate to describe all details of sexual experience of the characters. It is Leah, whose life is influenced by her bisexuality. Then there is Keisha whose experiments with vibrator lead to her separation from Leah. Moreover, Keisha lives her second life on the Internet where she offers her body. Readers should not be surprised by

the sexual scenes in details that are typical for the narrative of Zadie Smith.

For some readers some of the scenes in N-W can be seen as disgusting. For instance, when Felix visits his old girlfriend Annie and they end up making love on her terrace, nobody could find anything more revolting than this scene full of tampons, blood and taste of iron.

Zadie Smith speaks without constraint; her characters come into contact with many sexual issues, there are no scruples at all. Apparently, a detailed description of the difference between vaginal and clitoral orgasms is not likely to be expected in a novel. The author definitely does not shy away from any intimate topic.

As mentioned above, both Leah and Keisha search for true identities and sexuality is definitely one of the most important parts. Although Leah is aware of her bisexuality, she cannot accept it and she lives completely different life than she would like. Keisha is troubled by another sexual issue. She does not see intimacy as something that is connected to feelings. At the end her marriage is destroyed because of her advertisements for sex with couples.

It is incredible how openly Smith talks about anything what is so intimate that people would never speak about it. Her openness is totally shocking. Compared to Brick Lane, N-W is extremely outrageous and vivid. There are so many characters with many experiences and various types of sexual tendencies.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to analyse novels N-W by Zadie Smith and Brick Lane by Monica Ali in the context of post-colonial literature.

First of all, the thesis introduces the topics of post-colonialism and ethnicity. Secondly, it deals with the post-colonial literature and short introductions to work of Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. After the theoretical part, an analysis of main heroines and heroes and in both fictions follows. This chapter is divided into two parts - female and male characters are examined separately. Last part of the thesis is concerned with the environment in both novels. Both North-West London and Brick Lane are represented with connection to the storyline. The styles of writing - postmodern style of Zadie Smith and traditional point of view of Monica Ali in context of bildungsroman - are interpreted as well. The topics of sexuality and intimacy are examined with reference to obedience and freedom.

All in all, there were pointed out several different features between fictions N-W and Brick Lane. Firstly, Zadie Smith is able to create a vivid picture of a multicultural mixture of individuals and societies. Her characters are full of life and readers can easily imagine how people live in such a place like North West London. Although the heroes hardly leave the area of "the fictional Caldwell estate"¹⁹, readers are never

¹⁹ THOMAS, Philippa. Zadie Smith: 'NW' - 2012. In: *London Fictions* [online]. October 2012 [q. 2015-04-20]. Available from: <http://www.londonfictions.com/zadie-smith-nw.html>

bored, because one character follows another, reality is mixed with dreams, present is not separated from past. In spite of the fact that the whole book is divided into four sections and each one is dedicated to one character, the personalities (specially of Leah and Keisha) are well portrayed. Smith does not concentrate only on the characteristics of the heroes, but also on "the tensions of class, of race and of casual violence"²⁰ Smith talks openly about the most intimate issues. There is anything you can imagine - bisexuality, types of orgasms, tension, philosophical questions of time, gender themes, and stereotypes. Both women and men search for their identities, for the meaning of their lives.

On the contrary, *Brick Lane* is concerned with only one heroine and her world. It is undeniable that both Nazneen's and Hasina's life stories could be true stories. Although Monica Ali gives us a detailed portrait of Nazneen, the narrative is limited. As the flat restricts Nazneen's life, the description of the environment is relatively brief. Ali gives a description of the community of radical Muslims, thought. The methods, that are rather conventional, correspond to the traditional obedience of a Muslim wife.

As we live in a so-called postmodern world, the style of writing of Zadie Smith meets the requirement of contemporary lovers of fiction. Smith's

²⁰ THOMAS, Philippa. Zadie Smith: 'NW' - 2012. In: *London Fictions* [online]. October 2012 [q. 2015-04-20]. Available from: <http://www.londonfictions.com/zadie-smith-nw.html>

methods are unconventional. If there appears any philosophical question or issue, Smith does not hesitate to get over it with humour. The comical aspect of novel N-W is crucial and it helps readers not to get stuck in too serious topics.

On the whole, the approach of Monica Ali accomplishes the task of a novel; her style of writing is standard, without many inventions. Ali focuses on one detailed portrait of an obedient maturing woman. Brick Lane brings a realistic image of loneliness and search for freedom and maturity.

Overall, the differences and similarities between fictions N-W and Brick Lane were pointed out. Even though the authors have a similar experience of an immigrant in present-day London, their approaches vary. As a result of this fact, the contemporary English literature can give us many attitudes, various portraits of twenty-first-century immigrants communities in London.

This thesis does not cover all features and possible interpretations of post-colonial novels N-W and Brick Lane. That is why fictional characters and places introduced by Zadie Smith and Monica Ali can be potentially further analysed in another work.

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