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Kirmser Undergraduate Research Award Essay

The selection of a topic for my research paper for ENGL 660: Readings in Major Authors Geoffrey Chaucer and Zadie Smith was primarily influenced by the content assigned for the class. In the introduction of Smith's *Wife of Willesden*, she gives the many reasons why she chose to adapt a 14th century poem into a play in order to celebrate the diversity of contemporary London. The main interest that I wanted to explore was the ways in which Smith diverged from the original to make her play not only entertaining, but also relevant to contemporary culture and its audiences. I am very interested in the reception of classical and medieval texts and how authors subvert the expectations of the original texts to become applicable to today, despite the vast amount of time and societal norms that seem to put the past and present in opposition to one another. My paper argues that one of the biggest ways that Smith achieves this is through the setting in her dramatic adaptation from Arthurian Camelot to pre-abolition Jamaica. Additional factors that endorsed my research was the current climate concerning immigration policy and the eternal question of what it means to belong to a national identity, as I hoped to explore the cultural conceptions of citizenship in an increasingly globalized world. I sought to find evidence to support my argument through the resources available at Kansas State University's libraries.

I localized my research on two differing principles; literary theory and historical context. The main literary theories focused upon were postcolonial theory and feminist theory. I used the databases presented on K-State Libraries' website to find sources written by Rebecca Dyer and Adlai Murdoch that supported the application of these theories in relation to Caribbean literature. I also found several books about postcolonial theory within the stacks at Hale Library, which I used to help understand the theory better in order to fine tune several aspects of the paper, which included books by Ato Quayson and David Putner. As for the historical context that influenced my argument, I found sources by Harcourt Fuller and Alan Tuelon, in which the content was concerned with the history of colonized Jamaica alongside the people's folkloric traditions, primarily the national legendary figure of Queen Nanny. The main library

research tool used, therefore, were the databases found through K-State Libraries' website, primarily through the Jstor and Gale databases. Due to my employment by K-State Libraries as well as the ease of accessibility, there were no issues in navigating the databases and the stacks to find appropriate sources to uphold my argument.

Through the vetted sites and all of my scholarly secondary sources appearing in academic journals by experts and academics in the literary and historical fields, there was high trustworthiness in the integrity of the sources. The selection of the sources was also chosen by the differing filters within the databases, in which the various tags and identifiers allowed me to narrow down my options in order to find an extremely concentrated source that checked all of my boxes. This searching technique proved to be tremendously useful in my final paper. Although two of my sources were books selected for the course content, the majority of my academic sources were found through databases that were accessed through the K-State Libraries' Research resources. These invaluable resources were a primary reason in the success of my paper and a more thorough comprehension of literary theory and historical events that will continue to shape my own individual scholarship and conception of thought.

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Dr. Wendy Matlock

ENGL 660

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### The Implications of Setting in *The Wife of Willesden's Tale*

The fallacy of a monochromatic London, where whiteness and ethnic homogeneity dominates and triumphs over cultural spaces is an idea that contemporary author Zadie Smith vehemently rejects. Born and raised in the vibrant, multiethnic cultural supercenter of Brent Borough of London – home to Kiln Theater, Wembley Stadium, and the Hindu Neasden Temple – Smith's works celebrate a multicultural London. Her upbringing and personal history as a mixed race woman is reflected in her texts, as themes of family, history, identity, and community are weaved through her prose, and considered by her characters. Moreover, her hometown borough of Brent is the setting for almost all of her fictional bodies of work, as her novels, *White Teeth* and *NW*, are set in Brent. These communal variables of a similar setting and medium therefore marks one peculiar addition to Smith's authorial canon: *The Wife of Willesden*. Created on the occasion of her beloved Brent winning London's Borough of Culture 2020, in addition to a few wacky incidents that were chronicled in her introduction, resulted in the fashioning of her only play. As an adaptation of the monumental and foundational work of English Literature that is Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, she retells *The Wife of Bath's* story of the liberated sexual renegade Alisoun with a contemporary lens, as ideas of nationality, immigration, and community are intertwined amongst the original story. Characteristically, the setting of *The Wife of Willesden Prologue* is set in a colorful pub, called the Colin Campbell, which is situated on the Kilburn Road. However, the backdrop to the Tale is set in 1700s Jamaica. As Smith says in her introductory chapter, "The greatest change, perhaps, is in the tale itself, which has been switched from Arthurian England to eighteenth century Jamaica. Try as I

might, I couldn't imagine Alvita using King Arthur as a point of reference." The implications for this decision, placing *The Wife of Willesden's Tale* in pre-abolition Jamaica, with its folklore and traditions replacing the magic of Camelot that is demonstrated in Chaucer's original, adds deep complexities to the story, and creates a well-rounded view of the history of a diverse England. The setting of *The Wife of Willesden's Tale* (WoWT) ties together the rich tradition of Smith's works and adds a new angle to the commemoration of the beauty of the city while paying homage to the rich literary history of the nation.

### **I. Expansion on Female Autonomy**

There are several reasons why Smith may have felt compelled to set *The WoWT* in Jamaica. Jamaica and England act as foils of one another, as both are small islands lingering near a larger continent. However, one is an empirical state that is infamous for colonial efforts and dreary weather, while the other is a tropical island that was under England's colonial subjugation for 300 years. The two nations were tied together even further after the events of the Windrush scandal. Additionally, as established previously, Smith's own individual history inspires and shapes her stories. Looking at her familial ties, with an English father and a Jamaican mother, it feels as the obvious choice to change this one facet of Chaucer's original in order to fit the more contemporary and recent feeling of the play, opposed to setting it in the legendary and mythical realm of Arthurian Camelot.

One diverting change within the decision of setting the tale in Jamaica, is the Queen figure that pardons the knight, and sets forth the events of the Tale. Originally Queen Guinevere, King Arthur's wife in Chaucer's Tale, Smith chooses to replace her character with a famous historical Jamaican named Queen Nanny, a freedom fighter and leader of the Jamaican Windward Maroons, who used guerilla tactics to fight off British authorities on the island, and officially gained political autonomy in the 1730s. Over time, she has been transformed into a mythological figure, and has been cemented in Jamaican folklore. "Although stories told of Nanny by the Maroons are without doubt exaggerated, some are so gruesome that she must indeed have held rather extraordinary powers. She was supposed to have kept a huge

cauldron 'Nanny's Pot', which boiled without the aid of fire, into which were lured to a watery grave unsuspecting British soldiers and Militiamen. She was also attributed with the ability to catch the bullets of the soldiers with her posterior and hurl them back at her assailants in an obscene but effective manner.” (Tuelon, 21) The authority figure being known for her heroic efforts in the emancipation of her people is extremely poignant and draws attention to the overarching theme of female autonomy and liberation that exists in Chaucer's Tale.

Compared to the sovereign Queen Guinevere, who is best known for her love affair with her husband's best friend, Queen Nanny is functioning in a way that is working and reaching deeper than the original. Although Guinevere in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* has an immense amount of sovereignty in her own right – she commands the King to release the rapist knight into the court that she oversees and controls – Queen Nanny's individual prowess as a leader of a formerly enslaved community working to fight for the liberation of her people makes the impact of Alvita's character in *The WoWT* that much more cathartic. The characterization of her character being a great leader that is adored, is true in *The WoWT* and in the reality of Jamaican folklore. In the play she is described as someone “Who Jamaicans love to the *n*th degree” and “Queen Nanny, who rules this place with iron fist.” Smith is not shy about the rebellious and revolutionary subtext that is woven throughout the Tale, and Queen Nanny's characterization is putting those ideas at the forefront. With the tradition of Nanny as a national matriarch, Alvita is an inheritor of this rhetoric, as she is carrying on a legacy of autonomy and unabashed emancipation from the cultural confines that ensnare her, which in itself is a radical rebellious act. As Fuller states in his article, “The Windward Maroons are considered Grandy Nanny's ‘Yo-Yo’ (descendants or children). For the last few hundred years, they have inhabited their ancestral territories, including Moore Town and Old Nanny Town.” (Fuller, 278) Smith's masterful addition of Queen Nanny emphasizes the female liberation of Chaucer's Alisoun and shifts the autonomy of women to be more than a sexual angle (which is still present in Smith's adaptation, to be sure), but creates an intersectional lens that aids in the celebration of

racial diversity and multiculturalism within London while simultaneously recognizing the immigrant roots of many English citizens.

## **II. Adds The Celebration of Multiculturalism and Recognition of Colonialism**

In Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath Prologue*, there is an interest in Alisoun's background, her occupation, her relationships, and her experiences. It is not a reach to consider a modern adaptation of the Tale would want to include a character's racial identity as well as cultural background in lieu of the fascination of a character's history. By Smith writing this for Brent, it seems more of a reach to not have an addition of the celebration of multiculturalism that is notably absent in Chaucer's work. The stage directions that are written to set the scene in *The Wife of Willesden* state, "The Campbell is a quiet pub, usually occupied by a few all-day lone drinkers, but today these old men in their wrinkled suits are suddenly inundated by a colourful crowd. There's been dancing; some people are in carnival-like costume; there are people in their national dress, families, teenagers, lovers." Smith describing The Colin Campbell being overrun by "every possible kind of person" in a place where the original demographic of customers are old men, is symbolic of voices like Smith's being added to the English literary canon, where the works of dead white men reign supreme. Turner states in her book, "In asserting the multicultural nature of England, and specifically London, and in foregrounding the dynamic immediacy of contemporary dialects (Jamaican and Nigerian English), Agbabi, Breeze, and Smith are therefore drawing out aspects of Chaucer's own world, while also focusing on ways that his poetry can speak to and of new communities, in our own time and place." There is an addition of cultural diversity and voices that were not seen in the original.

Another inclusion is the recognition of colonialism in *WoWT*. It is difficult to have a successful, nuanced account of the commemoration of this racial blending without acknowledging the intricate history of colonial efforts and the assimilation of immigrants that led to the pub being populated by the wide variety of people presented in *WoWT*. The unasked question that everyone knows the answer to is

being considered in this text; Why are these people here? What brought them to England? What brought them to Brent? Setting the *WoWT* in Jamaica is recognizing only a small piece of deep colonial history that is riddled throughout the stories of modern postcolonial societies. Jamaica was a colony of England for almost 300 years and the long lasting effects that has on systematic institutions of education and government as well as individuals like Zadie Smith runs deep and can enwrap and envelop every aspect of a person's life. It is difficult to *not* think about it, especially in texts like *The Wife of Willesden*. Smith is simultaneously commending the diversity within London while also condemning the colonization efforts of her country, all while adapting the foundational work of "The Father of English Literature." There are complicated, convoluted pieces at play. Dyer states in her piece, "It is not surprising that Caribbean migrants' literary works are informed by a unique perspective, one that critically engages with both colonial history and the canonical British literature that these writers had read in colonial schools." (Dyer, 97) The characters in her debut novel, *White Teeth*, grapple with this as she works to explore this crux through a generational lens, writing from the parent's perspective and then later, through their children's point of view. Twenty years later, Smith is still interested in this in *The Wife of Willesden*.

A poignant component in the discourse of colonialism in the play is an aspect seen in both Smith and Chaucer's works. The presence of mystical forces being driven out, faeries in *The Wife of Bath* and the Jamaican folkloric duppy – a malevolent spirit or ghost – in *The Wife of Willesden*, are reminiscent of Christian ideologies being pushed in order to restrict the characters. In *The Wife of Bath*, the monk's existence is a symbol of the religious restrictions being imposed upon Alisoun's character in order to control her sexual autonomy. In *WoWT*, the varying types of missionaries arriving on the island and expelling the figures from Jamaican folklore are reminiscent of the christianization efforts that came with the colonization of the "new" world. As previously noted, the discourse surrounding the sexuality of Alvita is just as present in *The Wife of Willesden* as it is in *The Wife of Bath*, however the expulsion of the indigenous spirits adds the recognition of colonialism and the celebration of multiculturalism to the forefront of the *WoWT*. As Fuller states in his article, "These traditional, esoteric practices came under

increasing pressure, beginning in the early nineteenth century, when various Christian denominations began to gain a foothold in Maroon villages, reshaping the society and culture in their wake. The result has been a complex, compartmentalized relationship between the two spiritual systems in which they coexist in some contexts but confront each other in others.” (Fuller, 281). This cultural blending and coexisting is also extremely reminiscent of underlying themes that are littered throughout Smith’s works, and justifies her reasoning to place the Tale in Jamaica, as she is looking at the bigger picture of a multicultural London, and thinking about the origins of those who have emigrated into the city.

### **III. Expands Upon the Movement of People**

The foundation of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole is that it is a collection of differing stories told from the pilgrim’s perspectives while traveling from London to Canterbury to see the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket. As Smith recounts in her introduction, she connected the ancient Kilburn High Road, located in Brent, as a common route for pilgrims to the pilgrimage of *The Canterbury Tales*. The center of Chaucer’s magnum opus has always been about the movement of people, which is an idea Smith expands on and contorts to an alternative form of the movement of people, immigration. The dedication page of *The Wife of Willesden* reads, “Dedicated to the Windrush generation, with much love and respect” so the idea of immigration is present before the story even starts.

For context, The HMT Windrush was a passenger ship that transported hundreds of passengers from English colonies in the West Indies – predominantly Jamaicans – to aid in the rebuilding of the nation following WWII. The 1948 British Nationality Act gave people from English colonies the right to live and work in England. *Windrush* first docked in London from the Caribbean in 1948 and became a symbol of a wider mass-migration movement. However seventy years later in April 2018, Jamaican immigrants and others that had lived in the U.K for decades were threatened with deportation due to the UK Home Office not keeping proper records from those who emigrated under the 1971 Immigration Act. Many were unable to prove that they were in Britain legally as documentation had been destroyed. Those

who had emigrated to England from the West Indies were called the Windrush generation. Early 2018 was also uncoincidentally the year that Smith was asked to write a piece about Brent for winning London's borough of culture, out of which *The Wife of Willesden* was created.

This diaspora of Jamaican immigrants created a sense of mixed identity, a theme that Smith explores in her novels. In *White Teeth*, the character of Samad Iqbal struggles with an internal conflict throughout the entirety of the book concerning assimilation and what it means to be from somewhere and how that culture influences his perception on life. Murdoch recounts the experience these immigrants face, "They are the products of the new diasporas created by the post-colonial migrations. They must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them. In other words, an ongoing pattern of identitarian doubleness and simultaneity of cultural affiliation comes increasingly to characterize the modern migrant condition." Creating Alvita as a Jamaican born woman, and having her speech pattern jump between North London and Jamaican patois, is a nod to the multicultural neighborhood of Brent. Setting the *WoWT* in Jamaica is a way for those watching the play to connect with the experience that Murdoch describes in his article. In the *Wife of Willesden*, the character of the Author sets the scene:

"And the whole neighbourhood was in the streets

To celebrate the recent local feat:

Winning the London Borough of Culture.

Call it a pilgrimage: all together"

Once again, Smith pays homage to the origins of her adaptation by calling the party a pilgrimage.

However, this time around, those telling stories aren't just English Knights or Nuns or Millers, but they are Jamaicans and Nigerians and other immigrants in their national dress. Exploring London with the immigrant perspective in mind concerning the movement of people in *Wife of Willesden*, especially in collusion with the Tale being set in Jamaica is addressing the deep rooted issues that are needed to be reflected on alongside celebration of heritage.

#### IV. Conclusion

The purposefulness of placing the setting of *The Wife of Willesden's Tale* in pre-abolition Jamaica adds deep nuances to this contemporary adaptation and lets complex issues rise to the surface. Smith expands and adds upon the already established themes to fit a modern audience dealing with modern ideas and modern issues. However, the past is never over. It continually surrounds us each and everyday, it guides our decisions and is reflected even in ways one couldn't think were imaginable. Smith says in her introduction, "From the moment Alyson opens her mouth I knew that she was speaking to me, and that she was a Kilburn girl at heart. What started out as homework soon came to feel like a wonderful case of serendipity. For Alyson's voice – brash, honest, cheeky, salacious, outrageous, unapologetic – is one I've heard and loved all my life." Smith's own experiences as a daughter of a Jamaican immigrant, as a resident of London's Borough of Culture 2020, ties together the mastery of Chaucer's verse with a contemporary viewpoint that allows for accessibility and availability toward a present day audience. Shifting the Tale to Jamaica is one prospect of that availability and added new perspectives and voices to the English literary canon while paying respect to the titans that came before.

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