

The Autograph Man, by Zadie Smith: The Long Way to Heal Trauma

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ABSTRACT

Zadie Smith's second novel, *The Autograph Man* (2002), was severely reviewed by several critics who expected another 'multicultural novel' after her first literary success, *White Teeth* (2000). This paper aims to reflect on the importance of this second novel and to highlight the relevance of trauma in contemporary culture, which negates and is fascinated by this phenomenon. Through an analysis of the main character of the novel, this work reflects on how human beings try to escape the psychological effects of traumatic events, instead of facing the painful feelings they provoke and the changes they produce on the human psyche.

Keywords: trauma; simulacrum; postmodernity; healing; spiritual; Judaism

INTRODUCTION

Zadie Smith's second novel, *The Autograph Man*, was published in 2002. There were many expectations: *White Teeth*, her first work, had been a great success and Smith had been turned by the media into an icon of multiculturalism. *The Autograph Man* was a major disappointment for many critics and wrote in *The New Republic* Ruth Franklin claims

...gone almost completely are the imagination and the humanity of *White Teeth*; they have been replaced by gimmickry. The gimmicks, unfortunately, are not confined to the level of topography; they are manifest in nearly every aspect of Smith's new novel from the cartoonish figures to the caper-filled pot.

Michiko Katutani said in *The New York Times* said that "the plot [...] manages to be simultaneously schematic and messy, propelling its protagonist on wilfully whimsical adventures". But the problem with Smith's second novel was also a matter of what critics expected from her. As Gen'ichiro Itakura (2002, p.67) pointed out, "Smith's second novel, *The Autograph Man* provides a case of such black author's work being misconstrued by the reader's expectations of blackness". If many people wanted another story of ethnic problems, Zadie Smith was not receptive to their demands, for she offered a completely different novel: it is the story of a British-Chinese Jewish guy (the only trace of active multiculturalism) who is in his twenties, and tries to make a sense out of his life, much affected by the premature death of his father when he was a teenager. Smith talks about traumas, religion, post-modernity and the power of media narratives and discourses. But she does not say a single word about ethnicity.

The main goal of this article is to analyse *The Autograph Man* in terms of trauma and its healing. When Alex-Li Tandem, the protagonist of the novel, sees his father die, he starts creating all kinds of mental devices to avoid suffering. But Alex-Li represents much more than a single character. He is the metaphor for general trauma, which is experienced by a society that creates an overdeveloped sense of media to escape from real life and its trials. In the following pages, we will see that Zadie Smith's second novel was not the pretentious and messy narrative artefact that some critics have claimed, but a well-designed plan, capable of

providing specific clues in order to read some of the most salient features of this contemporary society that tends to hide painful experiences

BETWEEN TRAUMA AND SIMULACRUM

From a theoretical point of view, the novel fluctuates between the concept of trauma and postmodernist escapism, which is constructed around the idea of simulacrum. First, I will introduce the concept of trauma, which has become very much used in contemporary cultural studies. According to Freud (2013, p.285),

The traumatic neuroses show clear indications that they are grounded in a fixation upon the moment of the traumatic disaster. In their dreams, these patients regularly live over their traumatic situation; where there are attacks of a hysterical type, which permit of an analysis, we learn that the attack approximates a complete transposition into this situation, as if it were actually before them as an attack which was not yet mastered. [...] The traumatic experience is one which, in a very short space of time, is able to increase the strength of a given stimulus so enormously that its assimilation, or rather its elaboration, can no longer be effected by normal means”.

Cathy Caruth’s (1996, p.4) definition is less physiological: “an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor”. In a Lacanian sense, trauma sometimes implies an encounter with *the Real*. But the *Real* does not have to be understood as being synonymous with reality, but rather as a fearful dimension which has to be confronted, especially when it deals with traumatic events. It is a psychological dimension that symbolizes the ultimate nightmare, the deepest fear that may dissolve an individual’s psychic integrity¹.

However, trauma is not only an individual experience; it has a social and historical dimension. For example, societies and communities also get traumatized, what has created the perfect space for the emergence of Trauma Studies, i.e. an academic discipline concerned with the study of trauma within cultural artefacts. According to Ann Kaplan (2005, p.25), there are three main reasons that explain this interest in contemporary cultural critics:

- 1) The 1980s wave of books (some popular) by psychologists (some feminists), responding (as did Freud) to war injuries (this time however to the Viet-Nam War) and to increased awareness of child sexual abuse.
- 2) The unexpected turn of humanists to trauma in the late 1980s (and increasingly from then on), perhaps because trauma theory provided a welcome bridge back to social and political concerns in an era when high theory had become too abstract.
- 3) The reaction to what rapidly was seen as a kind of ‘faddish’ interest in trauma, or a collapsing of everything into trauma.

But trauma is not always explicit within the content of a cultural artefact, but may be manifested at structural levels too. Ulrich Baer, the editor of the book *110 stories: New York writes after September 11*, comments on this matter: “[In those cases, there is an] unconscious history-writing of the world: as a form of expression that uncannily registers subtle shifts in experience and changes in reality before they can be consciously grasped to have fully taken place” (quoted in Houen 2004, p. 421). The problem, therefore, is to analyse how traumatic events project on a text².

There is an obvious presence of trauma in *The Autograph Man*, mainly because of Li-Jin’s death at the beginning of the novel, which is a crucial element for Alex’s dysfunctional development. Nevertheless, we could also argue that the novel is connected to a post-September 11 *Zeitgeist*, with several descriptions of urban environments with no recognisable

referents, and the retreat into the individual and the virtual world - as if it were reflecting the desolation of contemporary society.

This retreat into the virtual world is directly opposite to the arduous task of facing real trauma, but it is still part of a postmodern texture in which reality, although often painful, is substituted by its more tamable copy. As Jean Baudrillard (1998, p.166) says, “It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” According to Baudrillard, we have entered an era of the simulacrum³, where

The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models –and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is hyperreal: the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere (p.167).

The main theoretical/philosophical problem that the novel poses is how to define a way out of the enclosing reality, even though this may imply facing painful and traumatic events. Reconnecting with real life is necessary for the protagonist (and, of course, for human beings) in order to have a healthy emotional life and to live with others. Regarding the need to face traumas, Slavoj Žižek (2002, p. 22) says,

The true choice *a propos* of historical traumas is not the one between remembering and forgetting them: traumas we are not ready or able to remember haunt us all the more forcefully. We should therefore accept the paradox that, in order really to forget an event, we must first summon up the strength to remember it properly. In order to account for this paradox, we should bear in mind that the opposite of existence is not non-existence, but *insistence*: that which does not exist continuously to insist, striving towards existence. [...] When I miss crucial ethical opportunity, and fail to make a move that would ‘change everything’, the very nonexistence of what I should have done will haunt me forever: although what I did not do does not exist, it continues to insist.

Zadie Smith has overtly showed her concern about these psychological/existential matters in some of her essays. In her work *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Forster Wallace*, she praises the American author’s work for trying to escape what Forster Wallace called ‘the postmodern trap’. According to Smith, Wallace explored an excess of self-awareness in contemporary culture, which disconnected individuals from the rest of society, where we are too much concerned with our own personal problems. Writing about one of Wallace’s characters Smith (2009, p.279) says:

For the depressed person pain has certainly been fetishized, pathologized: she can’t feel simple sadness, only ‘agony’; she’s not merely depressed, she is in ‘terrible and unceasing emotional pain’. Meanwhile, another kind of pain –the kind one feels for other people in their suffering- is inaccessible to her. When one of her Support System becomes terminally ill, the only pain it causes her (i.e. the depressed person) is the realization that *she doesn’t really care at all*, which in turn sparks in her mind the dreaded possibility that she might in fact be ‘a solipsistic, self-consumed, endless emotional vacuum as sponge’. She is disgusted by herself, and the disgust causes her yet more pain a pica-gnawed hands, and on it goes in its terrible cycle.

The problem is not an excess of pain, but the incapacity to assume it. For Wallace, “the horrific struggle to establish a human self-results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle... Our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home” (Smith 2009, p. 297). Assuming the traumatic side of this journey is the most important challenge for our protagonist, Alex-Li Tandem.

ALEX'S ESCAPE INTO NOTHINGNESS

The novel starts with the most important event of the story, Li Jin's death. Notice that this is so traumatic that Smith does not even narrate it. It is a blank space in the novel, an ellipsis, an inaccessible feeling, an *aporia*.

Since Alex cannot heal his trauma, he escapes into a *Baudrillardian* world of myths, films and unreal referents. In Baudrillard's own definition of reality, "the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (1988 p.169). Alex-Li substitutes a real teleology of history –in which the loss of trauma is inscribed- by a nostalgic fictional world with a bunch of classical cinema characters whose teachings seem to substitute paternal guidance:

It's not the new ones. It's the old ones. I don't give a damn about the new ones. I don't care if so-and-so makes a convincing paraplegic [...] I don't care if he climbed the Everest. I don't care. All that is useless to me. I can't watch a film after 1969. [...] It's like when you go on about Hollywood ... like saying it's a false religion that only worships pleasure and the rest – then if that's the case, at least do it properly.[...] Be honest about it. It's like: be Clark Gable, be the God of masculinity. Be Dietrich, the goddess of whatever, I dunno, easy virtue, say (136-137).

Classic cinema is the way in which Alex has to produce images and concepts that have an apparent universal essence. But in the end, they are the substitutes for real feelings and realities that are vanishing in our contemporary world. According to Baudrillard, "when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity" (p.170).

Žižek et. Al (2008, p. 19) say that "in a virtual, isolated space, every reconnection with the Real is, of course, something shattering; it is violent". In the case of Alex-Li, the connection between the Real and Li-Jin's death is obvious, but Alex fails to confront it. He prefers to escape. As Furman (2005, p. 13) says, "Tandem's self-destructive refusal to accept the inexorable mutability of life –his father's death representing the most painful embodiment of this law—is everywhere". In Terentowicz-Fotyga's article (2008, p. 65) where it is not always clear whether she refers to a 'reality-Real' or a 'Lacanian-Real', it is said that "Smith makes it clear that in contemporary media culture the concept of the Real cannot be safely used. The novel's main motif – autograph collecting is a perfect illustration of how the authenticity is both essential and impossible".

Alex-Li's friends try to convince him almost from the beginning of the novel to participate in the Jewish ceremony to remember his father, but he rejects it outright: "I just... the whole thing am so perverse. He's been dead fifteen years, Ads. And he wasn't even Jewish" (p.133). Alex refuses to be generous and does everything depending on whether it fits into his "film" or not. It is the Tandem circus: "Not everything in the world has to turn it into the Tandem roadshow. You're not the world" (p.61). But in spite of annoying everyone, he feels a sort of genius and compares himself with other geniuses who were not understood at their time:

Alex reflected on the plight of poor Franz Kafka. All day long stuck in that office, drawing the mutilated hands of strangers, the victims of industrial accidents. His genius ignored for so long. Suffocated by colleagues. Ridiculed by friends and family. Almost directly, Alex feels better. Yes, there was always Kafka. Alex found examples of ignored genius from history very soothing (p.156).

Alex-Li has a very narcissistic personality, with an over-inflated ego that is both characteristic of our contemporary world and smacks of a poor emotional life. His obsession

with fame and his desire to become some sort of heroic and mythical figure fit very well into this Freudian description about the typical symptoms of people with traumatic experiences:

What else could be back of these images and impulses, which appear from one knows not where, which have such great resistance to all the influences of an otherwise normal psychic life; which give the patient himself the impression that here are super-powerful guests from another world, immortals mixing in the affairs of mortals. Neurotic symptoms lead unmistakably to a conviction of the existence of an unconscious psychology, and for that very reason clinical psychiatry, which recognizes only a conscious psychology, has no explanation other than that they are present as indications of a particular kind of degeneration (p.240).

Alex's pathological behaviour makes him tremendously unhappy, in part because of his excessive self-consciousness:

He was twenty-seven years old. He was emotionally undeveloped, he supposed, like most Western kids. He was probably in denial of death. He was certainly suspicious of enlightenment. Above all, he liked to be entertained. He was in the habit of mouthing his own personality traits to himself like this while putting his coat on – he suspected that farm boys and people from the Third World never did this, that they were not self-conscious (p.63-64).

The excess of self-consciousness is potentially dangerous. As Alexander Lowen (1980, p. 217) says, “the self-conscious individual is not a happy person. He suffers from a deep-seated sense of inferiority for which for which the drive for power seems to compensate”. In the case of Alex, he projects all his negative feelings and libidinal energy in trying to be more important in the world of autographs. For Lowen (1980, p. 216), “It is the ego-conscious individual who struggles to rise higher in the social hierarchy. The higher he rises, the more ego conscious he becomes, which intensifies the ego drive for dominance and the struggle that it entails”.

Alex is unable to love. Or at least, he is unable to love in a healthy way. The perfect example of this is his relationship with Esther, his life-long girlfriend:

They had been together as children [...], she was as familiar to him as Mountjoy. He was capable of thinking of her in that very way –as a kind of wallpaper that he did not notice until a spotlight was thrown on it. [But] he imagined his love on a screen in front of a preview audience; he saw them watching her and ticking the boxes. Yes, he wanted his love at a distance, physically close but in some other way hard to reach. The stranger's initial impression of love –as an African princess, or the look-alike of this or that actress. [...] Yes, doctor, I want to be her fan. (p.99-100)

For Terentowicz - Fotyga (2008, p.63) Alex-Li's love depends very much on the existence of a romantic aura. Instead of loving in the real world, he needs to keep escaping. But in the end, this reflects his fear of losing Esther, of accepting the inevitable passing of time. As the narrator says, “only when they attended their respective universities did he become panicked at the thought of losing it”. For him, middle-distance is easier than proximity. And that is why he feels so comfortable with loving mythical actresses: they are frozen by time, an impossible fantasy, he will not reach them, for those women he has in photographs do not exist any longer.

Alex's pathological love has not been too much considered by critics, but it is something quite productive. It also manifests in his relationship with Boots, a girl who works in an autograph shop or in his relationship with Anita Chang, his neighbour:

Can women do this too? Can they switch from real people (Esther, only her, always) to fantasy people (Kitty, Anita, Boot, porn girls, shop girls, girl girls) and feel soothed by them? Will they ever tell? They don't tell. Women don't tell the truth about themselves.

About love, about the way they love. Or else the truth is genuinely pure, involving no second-guessing –in which case, who could stand to hear it? (p.161).

In his classic work, *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm (1956) mentions two issues which are very relevant here: on the one hand, the extension of consumerist capitalism into personal relationships:

Our whole culture is based on the appetite for buying, on the idea of a mutually favorable exchange. Modern man's happiness consists on the thrill of looking at the shop windows, and in buying all that he can afford to buy, either for cash or on installments. He (or she) looks at people in a similar way. For the man an attractive girl –and for the woman an attractive man- are the prizes they are after. "Attractive" usually means a nice package of qualities which are popular and sought after on the personality market. What specifically makes a person attractive depends on the fashion of the time, physically as well as mentally. (p.3)

On the other hand, he also mentions the addiction to the adrenaline feeling of falling in love: "[people] take the intensity of the infatuation, this being 'crazy' about each other, for proof of the intensity of their love, while it may only proof the intensity of their preceding loneliness (Fromm 1956, p.4). Esther, Alex's girlfriend, offers also her own diagnosis:

'There will never never be that moment, don't you get it?' she asked, punching the arm of the sofa. 'When you've had all the different people you want, when you're done, when you settle for me. People don't settle for people. They resolve to be with them. It takes faith. You draw a circle in the sand and you agree to stand in it and believe in it. It's faith, you idiot' (p.350).

THE COLLAPSING IDENTITY

Alex-Li's unstable balance starts crumbling after his trip to New York, where he meets his long-desired mythical totem, Kitty Alexander in New York. There, he starts his process of transformation and his "quest for the real" as Terentowicz-Fotyga (2008, p. 65) puts it. For Furman, "[Alex] comes to realize in New York [...] the futility of such efforts to stave off change and, ultimately, death. Kitty Alexander, whom he meets and befriends, is now an elderly woman leading a banal existence" (p. 13). Alex's encounter with Kitty has ambivalent effects. It produces within him much fascination, but at the same time it dismantles Alex's "iconic" relationship with Kitty. He has converted her into an object of desire, where he projects his libidinal energy. But Kitty seems reluctant to talk about her past life as an actress, as if she wanted to deconstruct the myth created around her, also by Alex:

I get almost no letters ever on this topic. I mean, letters concerning my cinematic career – she snorted at this- if you can give it such a grand name. A few maybe, once a year from the Oscar people- when they remember. But I don't care for any of it, really. My life has moved on –I mean I hope it has moved on, I flatter myself it has, at least (p.278-279).

Kitty represents a sort of mirror for Alex: instead of a being passive object, she becomes a crucial element in Alex's personal transformation. The reference she makes to the letters Alex has sent her for many years is an example of this mirroring capacity:

Why did you write? You are really too young even to remember my last film, no matter my first. I think', she whispered playfully, 'it suggests a lack of sexual intrigue in your life, to be interested in this ancient history. There is no girlfriend, or she is not effective. There is a lack somewhere. I think this must be true. (p.287)

Nevertheless, Alex's world also falls apart because he becomes aware of his job's futility. When he finally sells Kitty's autographs, he simply feels emptiness, although he is at the top of his professional career: "He was not only not the person they thought he was (rich, lucky, and shrewd); he was not the person he thought (useless, damaged, and doomed). The truth was somewhere midway, and for the first time in his life he realized that he did not own it" (p. 360).

The terminal illness of Duchamp, Alex's quasi-professional mentor for Alex, is of great importance. As Philip Tew (2010, p. 83) says, "...through Duchamp, Alex relives the origins of his own fear and self-obsession, the trauma of paternal loss and absence". But Duchamp not only has paternal traits. He somehow reflects Alex's potential destiny: the nightmarish dimension of the *Real* could also enter his self-constructed world of searching for famous people's autographs, which symbolizes his quest for personal significance. As Duchamp later realizes, he is simply a detritus of cultural industry and has only one piece of advice to give Alex: "Women are the answer. They are. If you'll only let them into the story. Women. They are the answer" (p.171). In Alex's visit to Duchamp, there is also a rhapsodic episode:

He was unable to take his mind or eyes off the man in the next bed, who was much, much too young to be in this place. It was an affront to Alex's own sense of himself, this out of place youth. It was obscene. There is a time and a place for youth and it's not in a cardiac ward [...] Hospital's are called St Mary's, St Stephen's, St Somebody's. This one was St Christopher's. They should all be called Job's. Job is the rightful patron of hospitals. Job has guts. Job would ask: why this young man? Why the children's ward? Why (and this last one is almost impossible) the babies in intensive? Why do babies get intensively sick? What is going on here? (p.370)

Critics have not paid much attention to this episode: Job is maybe one of the most interesting characters in the Bible: he is seen as man whose personal suffering is beyond human comprehension. In Job's book, the Devil tells God that Job's goodness depends on what he can obtain in exchange from God. Then, God, challenges the Devil to prove Job's goodness through all types of punishment. Despite his immense struggles, Job remains faithful to God, though he questions why he has suffered so much if he is not a sinner. Here is the old dilemma: why do good and innocent people have to suffer? In the case of Alex, the question is obviously related to his father: why did Lin-Jin, a good man, have to die so soon, at only thirty-five years of age? Job remains faithful to God, yet still questions his ultimate fate, i.e. as if he were being moderately rebellious towards his Creator. In a similar vein, Alex is also rebellious. It is unclear, however, whom he is rebelling against. Nevertheless, he, too, remains equally unhappy about his situation.

FACING THE REAL THROUGH AN AUTHENTIC SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

Religion is an important element of the novel, for it is related to Alex's process of personal healing. There is a rejection of what we could call 'official religion', which is symbolized by Rubinfine's Judaism. Rubinfine decides to become to become a rabbi not only to follow his father's desires, but also to play an important role in the community. It is not so much a question of transcendence here, but rather the need to keep traditions and uphold an egocentric attitude. This is reflected in Rubinfine's inability to cope with impending complex issues:

Rubinfine leant forward to look out at Mountjoy. Out there, that was his world. He couldn't conceive of having no power in Mountjoy, no audience. [...] No matter what Mountjoy thought, he had not become a rabbi solely to please his father. In his own small

way he had wanted to carry things forward. Like the continuity man on a film set. At the time, this was an analogy that has not satisfied Adam, who thought the call to the rabbinate should be entirely pure, a discussion a man has with God. But God had never spoken to Rubinfine, really (p. 200-201)

Although Adam's attitude towards religion is much more honest, Alex also rejects his requests to pray the *kaddish* in the religious ceremony, which was to be uttered in honour of Li-Jin. Alex, however, rejects the more traditional ways of attaining long-lasting spiritual peace. If they don't relieve a person instantaneously from ill or trouble, they don't work, he said: "There's no other good but feeling good", he said, shaking his head. 'Ads, that's what good is. That's what you've never understood. It's not a symbol of something else. Good has to be felt (p.411). Zadie Smith's narration of the final Kaddish prayer reflects this view: she creates a scene where parody is used, but which has no spiritual connection. Moreover, Alex pays more attention to people's gestures than to the effectiveness of his prayers.

Jonathan Sell (2010, p.126) assures that "as for Alex-Li's performance of the Kaddish, the point about it is that it *is* a performance, a gesture, the sincerity of which is consequently uncertain". This statement would be valid if there was not an alternative Kaddish, the one Alex prays in his room's darkness, while Esther and Kitty sleep and where he realizes how afraid he is of losing them:

He hadn't take it personally [Smith is referring to the anecdote of a cousin who had gone to his house and said she didn't want to sleep there, because there were dead people on the walls –referring to Li-Jin], not for years. He took it cinematically, or televisually –if he took it at all. But here it came –he tried to grab the top of the door-frame to keep himself up- here was the death-punch, the infinity-slap, and it was mighty. He wheeled away from the spot, clutching in his hand something he had accidentally ripped from the wall, his mouth was open like someone had kicked a hole in his face. But he made no noise. He didn't want to wake the dead. He had control, still. He found some spot where he could not be heard, hot and dry and full of towels, and said his Kaddish without gesture or formality –just a wet song into his hand (p.392).

As Furman (2005, p.14) says, "Tandem cannot bear to have his father's *yahrzeit* [Jewish funerary ceremony] likewise reduced to a charade". Instead, he prefers a deep and solitary prayer. In this long and moving paragraph, Alex finally faces his fear and traumatic past. He confronts the so-called *Real* through the personification of loss and death. Instead of escaping to a virtual celebratory world, he incorporates his trauma into his personal biography. But there is also an ethical component to this action. It is what Lacan calls 'the ethics of the real'.

According to Cathy Caruth (1996), Lacan coined this term in one of his seminars, when he was re-examining a dream from one of Freud's works: one of Freud's patient's offspring had died at home during a fire. The following night, the patient dreamt that his son was talking to him while saying 'Dad, don't you see I am burning?' For Lacan, this dream implies a confrontation with the Real dimension of loss, but also with the ethical responsibility a father feels for not having saved his son from death. As Caruth says, "the bond to the child, the sense of responsibility, is in its essence tied to the impossibility of recognizing the child in its potential death. And it is this bond that the dream reveals, exemplarily, as the real, as an encounter with a real established around an inherent impossibility (1996 p.103). There is a smattering of this feeling in Alex and Sarah, who were both ignorant of Li-Jin's illness - someone who dies alone in the middle of a crowd at the Royal Albert Hall. And then, there's the feeling of resulting emptiness: "And all without Li-Jin. The terrible, undimmed sadness of it. Every time they [Alex and his mother, Sarah], they felt it afresh, as if they had planned a picnic, Alex arriving with the entire cutlery, Sarah with the mackintosh squares- where was the food?"(p. 91).

However, there is also another ethical component in the encounter with Real, according to Lacan. As Caruth explains,

It is this child who, from within the failure of the father's seeing, commands the father to awaken and to live, and to live precisely as the seeing of another, a different burning. The father, who would have stayed inside the dream to see his child alive once more, is commanded by this child to see not from the inside –the inside of the dream, and the inside of the death, which is the only place the child could now be truly seen –but from the outside, to leave the child in the dream so as to awaken elsewhere. It is the dead child [...] who says to the father: *wake up, leave me; survive to tell the story of my burning* (1996 p.105).

This encounter generates a responsibility with the Other, who can no longer fully or adequately express himself or herself. It is a peculiar and fateful end, which must be accepted, instead of being denied. Through his personal *kaddish*, Alex re-inscribes his father in his evolution as a person.

Nevertheless, for some critics, Alex's transformation is not merely incomplete, but rather a slight catharsis. Jonathan Sell, for example, says that:

Even though both books [the two books that comprise the novel] culminate in the achievement of a goal (the tracking down of Kitty Alexander and the performance of the *kaddish*), there is never any sense of Taylorian *telos* being achieved and thus bestowing significance on and providing closure for Alex-Li's identity (2010, p.126).

However, this anti-climax ending occurs as a result of two major factors. One is purely structural: Smith places the formal *Kaddish* at the end of the novel and her parodic tone mitigates the narrative impact of the first *Kaddish*. But there is also a problem that deals with postmodern texture: the accumulation of episodes, reflections, digressions, allusions that do not contribute to climatic endings. This texture leads us to a more general philosophical question: "To what extent is Alex-Li able to think about himself from the outside? To what extent is it possible to transcend the simulacrum and create and formulate a new language without resorting to old traditions? As Žižek (2002, p.7-8) says, "we 'feel free' because we lack the very language to articulate our un-freedom" [...] in this precise sense, our 'freedoms' themselves serve to mask and sustain our deeper un-freedom. But this lack of real freedom, according to Žižek, is associated with capitalism's postmodern facade: "in the developed West, frantic social activity conceals the basic sameness of global capitalism, the absence of an Event [understood as a big transformative historically disruptive moment] (Žižek 2002, p. 7).

The only character of the novel that seems to think from the outside of the media world is Li-Jin. If the parts of the novel dedicated to Alex were jolted or digressive, or much characterized by a more contemporary style, Li-Jin's part would be more reflexive and meditative, i.e. as if he had symbolized the ancestral Father that cared more about the others, and where he possessed the authority of ancient wisdom. Smith constantly uses the word YHVH throughout the chapter, thus converting him into an absent God in the novel: the only one who is able to transcend the dynamics of contemporary culture, notwithstanding the emptiness that lied beneath the simulacrum. In the following extract, Li-Jin reflects on wrestling and the pretentiousness that surrounds this sport:

Feeling awkward, Li-Jin does exactly that, he suits himself. He turns back to look at the stage. He bites at the nail of his right thumb. He chews the top right off it. What was that all about? [...] What are all these people doing? Why all this fuss? What do you need to do except allow two men to walk on stage, fling off their cloaks, bend their heads low and grasp each other? And yet little blokes in baseball caps run from one end of the stage to the other, shouting instructions (p.23).

When Alex recognizes his trauma, he also accepts the notion of his final legacy. This does not necessarily mean, however, that official religions are debunked, but rather that a deeper spirituality is encountered. In fact, this is the tool he needs to face life's trials and to be able to love openly, without being beset by fear.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the article, I referred to the fact that many critics did not like this novel because it did not fit into their understanding of multiculturalism or their expectations of the author. I would add that they simply did not understand Smith's goal in writing this book. The novel is deeply generational. It portrays the world lived by the generation of people who are now in their thirties and who typically had great expectations about the future. However, as the author shows, there has been much of *Baudrillardian* reality in such expectations, with so many heavy influences from cinema and television. Also, there has been much frustration coming from the incapacity to endure or overcome personal difficulties. As mentioned earlier in this essay, this psychological context creates both theoretical and philosophical problems in the novel: the difficulty of human beings to face tragic events, the individual's tendency to create a self-centred escapist world, and the impossibility to connect with others. I have tried to analyse all these aspects through the character of Alex-Li Tandem. And the conclusion of my analysis about the novel is that only through the acceptance of life's tragic dimensions and through the connection with others can Alex Li live a truly meaningful life, which in fact he finally does. For this to become a reality, certain rites and rituals should be present, but only when they are deeply felt, as evinced by Alex-Li's personal *Kaddish*. As Zadie Smith wrote in reference to Forster Wallace's work, which has been a major inspiration in her thinking, the thread that holds everything together consists of "The struggle with ego, the struggle with the self, the struggle to allow other people to exist in the genuine 'otherness'". (Smith 2009, p.291).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In the wonderful book *Conversations with Žižek*, the co-author/interviewer Glyn Daly gives a very clear explanation about the concept of the Real from a Lacanian perspective: "Lacan identifies the Real in relation to two other basic dimensions –the symbolic and the imagery- and together these constitute the triadic (Borromean) structure of all being. For Lacan, what we call 'reality' is articulated through signification (the symbolic) and the characteristic patterning of images (the imaginary). Strictly speaking, both the symbolic and the imaginary function within the order of signification. As with Einstein's 'general' and 'special' theory of relativity, the imaginary may be regarded as a special case of signification. What differentiates them is that while the symbolic is in principle open-ended, the imaginary seeks to domesticate this open-endedness through the imposition of a fantasmatic landscape that is peculiar to each individual. In other words, the imaginary arrests the symbolic around certain fundamental fantasies. [...] The Real, by contrast, does not belong to the (symbolic-imaginary) order of signification but is precisely that which negates the latter; that which cannot be incorporated within such an order. The Real persists as an eternal dimension of lack and every symbolic-imaginary construction exists as a certain historical answer to that basic lack. The Real always functions in such a

way that it imposes limits of negation on any signifying (discursive) order and yet through the very imposition of such limits –it serves simultaneously to constitute such an order. The real in this sense is strictly inherent to signification: it is both the unsurpassable horizon of negativity for any system of signification and its very conditions of possibility. [...] Just as being may be understood as being may be understood as being-towards-madness, reality is always reality-towards-the-Real. Every form of (symbolic-imaginary) reality exists as an impossible attempt to escape the various manifestations of the Real that threatens disintegration of one kind or another: trauma, loss, anxiety and so on (p. 6-7).

- 2 In order to know more about the representation of 9/11 in Literature, read “The Use of Historical Allusion in Recent American and Arab Fiction”, by Riyad Manqoush, Noraini Md. Yusof and Ruzy Suliza Hashim. The authors explore on the political consequences of this terrible attack, which were not only traumatic for Americans, but also for Arab countries, especially Iraq.
- 3 The idea of simulacrum has also profound implications at a political level, as it is perfectly illustrated by Seyed Jauad Habibi in his article “Democracy as Simulacrum: Incredulity towards the Metanarrative on Emancipation in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*”. In this article, the author reflects about the material conditions of comfort lived by the novel’s main character, which represent Western democracy’s tense stability, constructed upon social injustice at an international level. This democracy, no longer with its deep moral essence, is a particular type of political simulacrum. Notice how *Saturday*’s protagonist retreats into his middle-class comfort not to bear the terrible political implications of political injustice. In the same way, Alex-Li retreats into his cinematographic reality not to confront his traumas and to avoid enduring his responsibilities towards others.

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