

## Audio file

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## Transcript

00:00:28 Jim Phelan

Hello, I'm Jim Phelan, director of Project Narrative at The Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative podcast. In each episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me or another host. Today I'll be talking with Robyn Warhol, who has selected Zadie Smith's 1999 short story called "The Waiter's Wife." Smith also incorporated this story into her award-winning novel, *White Teeth*, published the following year, 2000. Robyn Warhol is Arts and Humanities Distinguished Professor of English at The Ohio State University. A core faculty member of Project Narrative, Robyn served as the program's director from 2010 to 2012. Robyn has been doing innovative scholarship over the course of her distinguished career. Her first book, *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel*, 1989, helped to launch feminist narratology. The book articulates key principles of the subfield and demonstrates some of its consequences through Robyn's astute analyses of narrator-narratee relationships in the Victorian novel. Robyn's 2003 book, *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Popular Forms*, is a brilliant study of the ways sentimental, romantic and serial texts work to establish and reinforce gendered performance in fans of long-form TV series, Hollywood film, and Victorian and contemporary serial fiction. In 2016, Robyn and her co-pioneer in feminist narratology, Susan Lanzar of Brandeis University, co-edited the volume *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Narrative Theories*. The essays in that collection offer a collective statement about the robust enterprise of feminist narratology. As the subtitle of Robyn's first book indicates, she has also made substantial contributions to work in Victorian - Victorian literature and culture throughout her career. In 2015, Robyn and her co-author Helena Mickey published a work of meta-archival biography, *Love Among the Archives: Writing the Lives of Sir George Scharf, Victorian Bachelor*. This work won the Best Book Prize, given by the North American Victorian Studies Association. In recent years Robyn has been constructing the website Reading Like a Victorian, whose purpose is to make it possible for contemporary audiences to read Victorian novels serially in their cultural context. Robyn and Helena have written an essay, "Synchronic Reading," forthcoming in the January 2022 issue of *Narrative*, that articulates the principles and the consequences of the approach that informs Robyn's website. The International Society for the Study of Narrative has named Robyn the winner of its 2022 Wayne C. Booth Lifetime Achievement Award. Robyn, before you begin reading Zadie Smith's "The Waiter's Wife," is there anything you'd like to - our listeners to know?

00:03:48 Robyn Warhol

Yes, Jim first thank you so much for that very generous introduction. I'm very happy to be here and to be sharing this wonderful story with your podcast audience. I just wanted to say a couple of things about Zadie Smith and where she's coming from in writing this story and then *White Teeth*, the novel that it's part of. She is a Jamaican Anglo Brit who was born in 1975 in the northern part of London in Willesden, which was at that time, and I believe still is quite racially diverse. And it is also the setting for much of this story. Willesden is where the - the - the action of the story occurs, so she's writing about the - the

neighborhoods and the people around her in her childhood, looking back. And I also wanted to say that, that - that - that Zadie Smith has described London as, and I want to quote this, "A Dream - The Dream City." Capital D, Capital C. She says, "It's a place of many voices, where the unified singular self is an illusion. You have no choice but to cross borders." And before I read the story, I just wanted to say a little bit about where - what the context is within feminist thinking and postcolonial thinking for a comment like that, because I think that it really does inform what she's doing strategically with this story to demonstrate these things. First of all, just thinking in terms of postmodern feminism and the idea that there is no - that - that the unified self is an illusion. This is something, as you know, I actually believe with all my heart.

00:05:41 Jim Phelan

Yeah, so we've talked about this before, right, yeah.

00:05:43 Robyn Warhol

And - and - and the - the idea in postmodern feminism is that - that - that every self is deeply divided to the extent that it's impossible to pin down a self that you could say, this is me. The subject doesn't have a single unified identity, so there's no real me in in this way of thinking, and what that means is that within every person's subjectivity, there's such a blend of who you were in the past with and who you are in the present, of what you remember and what you're perceiving at the moment, of what's going on consciously in your mind and what's in the unconscious. And the principle of the unconscious is an important component of this way of thinking about the self, and that while we perceive some kind of split between body and mind, you know the body stuffs itself with chocolate, while the mind is saying I'm too fat, I shouldn't do this, in fact the two things are - we know this, just even neurologically - are so completely interconnected that you can't say that, well, the real me wants chocolate or the real me doesn't want chocolate. It's - it's both/and.

00:06:56 Jim Phelan

Right, Descartes has a lot to, you know, be accounted for, right?

00:07:01 Robyn Warhol

It's - it's true, it's true. And - and - and postmodern feminism, I think has really taken us a long way from that idea. And so instead of I think, therefore I am, the postmodern feminist idea is I am what I do. If I need to - if I need for strategic reasons, as Gayatri Spivak called it strategic essentialism, if I need to identify as a particular identity, it's - it's my actions, and in that sense the self is performative. We do ourselves. We aren't just - it isn't that we are ourselves, we, we do ourselves, not performative, in the sense of anything false, but just in the sense of, like, performing an act, making it happen. And I, in this way of thinking, I exist mainly in relation to the other, but not with the other as the object of my subjectivity. The goal for this kind of feminist thinking is an inter-subjectivity, right, where we encounter others and - and take their otherness into account in the way that we relate to them. And it's through those relationships and those actions that we - that we - that's what makes the self, that's what I am. So when she says that it's impossible to have the illusion of a split - of a unified self in contemporary London, I think partly she's thinking about that. But she's also thinking, and this is what comes through so clearly in the story, about concepts that come to us from postcolonial thinking, and we tend to think of postcolonial fiction. As originating in the places where colon - colonizers used to be and where the

the formerly colonized are representing what the aftermath of that is. But Zadie Smith is profoundly postcolonial in that she represents a part of that worldwide movement of diaspora, of people who originate in those places where the colonizers were, but rather than staying put, who migrated back to the colonial capital. So Zadie Smith's father is Anglo, her mother is Jamaican and Jamaica, of course, is an important part of that Black Atlantic world, right, that - that - from - from which many people have gone back to London. Gone back, you know, and that we - we say from our point of view, but have - have gone to London to live instead of staying behind. And the things that postcolonial theory asks us to think about as a result of that are hybridity, and we think about hybridity in the formerly colonized nations, and it's those all those signs of the - of the colonizers that have left behind. But people who, in the various diasporas may move from those locations to the Western capitals, they're hybrid too, that is, they've got this mixing of their home nations' cultures with the - the ways of the colonizers and - and - and it's really part of split subjectivity. That is, they're both where they came from, and they're this new person that they are in this new place and as she demonstrates so well in this story, the process of assimilation for these people coming - for immigrants coming to a place like London involved dramatic shifts in identity. The class status changes dramatically, their - their gender relations change dramatically, and their gender identities. There's huge shifts in their language, and the way Zadie Smith handles this, so wonderfully is through parody and satire, which is also, I think, very common among post colonialist writers. Rushdie, for instance, always very funny in addressing these incredibly serious and important topics. So that's what I wanted our listeners to be thinking about as I read this story.

00:11:04 Jim Phelan

OK, excellent, so here's Robyn reading "The Waiter's Wife," by Zadie Smith.

00:11:10 Robyn Warhol

In the spring of 1975, Samad and Alsana Iqbal left Bangladesh and came to live in Whitechapel, London, the other side of town from Archie and Clara Jones. Samad and Archie had a friendship dating back to the Second World War, back to the hot and claustrophobic Churchill tank in which they sat side by side for three months, close enough to smell each other and to recognize those scents thirty years later when Samad emerged from Gate 12, Heathrow, with a young wife and a paisley-patterned luggage set in tow. "Long time, no see," Archie had said reaching out to grasp his old friend's palm, but Samad converted the handshake into a hug almost immediately, "*Archibald Jones*. Long time, no bloody *smell*."

They fell back into easy conversation, two old boys slipping swiftly into an acquaintance as comfortable as slippers while their wives stood either side of the bags, noting they had this thing in common and no more: that they were young, much younger than the men that they stood awkwardly beside. They looked an unlikely pair. Alsana was small and round, moon-faced and with thick fingers she hid in the folds of her cardigan. Clara was tall, striking, a black girl with a winning smile wearing red shorts of a shortness that Alsana had never imagined possible, even in this country.

"Hot pants," said Clara, shyly, in response to Alsana's wide eyes, "I made them myself."

"I sew also," Alsana replied, and they had a pleasant enough chat about seams and bobbins, materials and prices per yard, in a motorway service station over an indigestible lunch. "The wives get on like a house on fire," Archie had said merrily giving Samad a nudge in the ribs. But this made them nervous, the two young wives and after the ice cream sundaes, they sat in silence.

So some people - black people *are* friendly, thought Alsana after that first meeting was over. It was her habit to single out one shining exception under every minority she disliked; certain dentists, certain singers, certain film stars had been granted special - specialist treatment in the past and now Clara Jones was to be given Alsana's golden reprieve. Their relations were hesitant in the beginning--a few lunch dates here and there, the occasional coffee; neither wished to admit how much time they had on their hands, though newly wed, or that Archie and Samad were always together. It wasn't until the Iqbals moved north, two minutes from Archie and his favorite watering hole, that the women truly resigned themselves to their husbands' mutual appreciation society and started something of a rearguard action. Picnics, the movies, museums, swimming pools--just the two of them. But even when they became fairly close, it was impossible to forget what a peculiar couple they made on the bus, in the park.

It took the Iqbals a year to get to Willesden High Road: a year of mercilessly hard graft to make the momentous move from the wrong side of Whitechapel to the wrong side of Willesden. A year's worth of Alsana banging away at the old Singer machine that sat in the kitchen, sewing together pieces of black plastic for a shop called Domination in Soho (many were the nights Alsana would hold up a piece of clothing she had just made following the plans she was given and wonder what on Earth it was). A year's worth of Samad softly inclining his head at exactly the correct deferential angle, pencil in his right hand, notepad in his left, listening to the appalling pronunciation of the British, Spanish, American, French, Australian:

Go Bye Ello Sag, Please.

Chicken Jail Fret See Wiv Chips, Fanks.

From six in the evening until four in the morning was work, and the rest was sleep, sleep without pause, until daylight was as rare as a decent tip. For what is the point, Samad would think, pushing aside two mints and a receipt to find 15 pence, what is the point of tipping a man the same amount you would throw in a fountain to chase a wish? But before the illegal thought of folding the 15 pence discreetly in his napkin hand had a chance to give itself form, Mukhul, Ardashir Mukhul, who ran The Palace and whose wiry frame paced the restaurant, one benevolent eye on the customers, one ever-watchful eye on the staff--Ardashir Mukhul was upon him.

"Saaamaad," he said in his cloying, oleaginous way, "did you kiss the necessary backside this evening, Cousin?"

Samad and Ardashir were distant cousins, Samad the elder by six years. With what joy, (pure bliss!) had Ardashir opened the letter last January, to find his older, cleverer, handsomer cousin could get no work as a food inspector in England and could he possibly...

"Fifteen pence, Cousin," said Samad, lifting his palm.

"Well, every little helps, every little helps," said Ardashir, his dead-fish lips stretching into a stringy smile. "Into the Piss-Pot with it."

The Piss-Pot was a black cooking pot that sat on a plinth outside the stall toilets into which all tips were pooled and then split at the end of the night. For the younger, good-looking waiters like Shiva this was a great injustice. Shiva was the only Hindu on the staff, a tribute to his waitering skills that had triumphed over religious difference. He could make fifteen pounds in tips in an evening if the blubberous white

divorcee in the corner was lonely enough, and he batted his long lashes at her effectively. He also made money from the polo-necked directors and producers (The Palace sat in the center of London's Theatreland) who flattered the boy, watched his ass wiggle provocatively to the bar and back, and swore that the next time someone put *A Passage to India* on the stage, the casting couch would be his. For Shiva then, the Piss-Pot system was simply daylight robbery. But for men like Samad, in his forties, and for the even older, like the white-haired Mohammed (Ardashir's great uncle), who was eighty if he was a day, who had deep pathways dug into the sides of his mouth where he had smiled when he was young--for men like this, the Piss-Pot could not be complained about. It was a boon if anything, and it made more sense to join the collective than pocket fifteen pence and risk being caught (and docked a week's tips).

"You're all on my back," Shiva would snarl when he had to relinquish 5 pounds at the end of the night and drop it into the pot. "You all live off my back! Somebody get these losers off my back! That was my fiver and now it's going to be split sixty-five-fucking-million ways as a handout to these losers! What is this, communism?"

And the rest would avoid his glare and busy themselves quietly with other things until one evening, one fifteen-pence evening, Samad said, "Shut up, boy," quietly, almost underneath his breath.

"You!" Shiva swung round to where Samad stood crushing a great tub of lentils for tomorrow's dhal. "You're the worst of them! You're the worst fucking waiter I've ever seen. You couldn't get a tip if you mugged the bastards! I hear you trying to talk to the customer about biology this, politics that--Just serve the food, you idiot--you're a waiter, for fuck's sake, you're not Michael Parkinson. *Did I hear you say Delhi--*" Shiva put his apron over his arm and began posturing around the kitchen (he was a pitiful mimic) "*--I was there myself, you know Delhi University, it was most fascinating, yes--and I fought in the war for England, yes--yes, yes, charming, charming--*" round and round the kitchen he went, bending his head and rubbing his hands over and over like Uriah Heep, bowing and genuflecting to the head cook, to the old man arranging great hunks of meat in the walk-in freezer, to the young boy scrubbing the inside of the oven. "Samad, *Samad...*" he said with what seemed infinite pity, then stopped abruptly, pulled the apron off and wrapped it around his waist, "You're a sad bastard."

Mohammed looked up from his pot-scrubbing and shook his head again and again. To no one in particular he said, "These young people--what kind of talk? What happened to respect? What kind of talk is this?"

"And you, you can fuck off too--" said Shiva, brandishing a ladle in his direction, "--You old fool! You're not my father."

"Second cousin of your mother's uncle," a voice muttered from the back.

"Bollocks," said Shiva. "Bollocks to that."

He grabbed the mop and was heading off for the toilets when he stopped by Samad and placed the broom inches from Samad's mouth.

"Kiss it, he sneered: and then impersonating Ardashir's sluggish drawl, "Who knows, Cousin, you might get a raise!"

And that's what it was like most nights; abuse from Shiva and others; condescension from Ardashir; never seeing Alsana; never seeing the sun; clutching fifteen pence and then releasing it; wanting desperately to be wearing a sign. A large white placard that said:

I AM NOT A WAITER. THAT IS, I AM A WAITER, BUT NOT JUST A WAITER. I HAVE BEEN A STUDENT, A SCIENTIST, A SOLDIER. MY WIFE IS CALLED ALSANA. WE LIVE IN EAST LONDON BUT WE WOULD LIKE TO MOVE NORTH. I AM A MUSLIM BUT ALLAH HAS FORSAKEN ME OR I HAVE FORSAKEN ALLAH. I'M NOT SURE. I HAVE AN ENGLISH FRIEND--ARCHIE--AND OTHERS. I AM FORTY-NINE BUT WOMEN STILL TURN IN THE STREET. SOMETIMES.

But no such placard existing, he had instead the urge, the need, to speak to every man, and like the Ancient Mariner, to explain, always to explain, to reassert something, anything. Wasn't that important? But then the heartbreaking disappointment--to find out that the inclining of one's head, poising of one's pen, these were important, so important. It was important to be a good waiter, to listen when someone said:

Lamb Dawn Sock and Rice. Please. With Chips. Thank you.

And fifteen pence clinked on china. Thank you Sir. Thank you so very much.

One evening, shortly after he had put the down payment on the Willesden Flat, Samad had waited till everyone left and then climbed the loudly carpeted stairs to Ardashir's office, for he had something to ask him.

"Cousin!" said Ardashir with a friendly grimace at the sight of Samad's body curling cautiously round the door. He knew that Samad had come to inquire about a pay increase, and he wanted his cousin to feel that he had at least considered the case in all his friendly judiciousness before he declined.

"Cousin, come in!"

"Good evening Ardashir Mukhul," said Samad, stepping fully into the room.

"Sit down, sit down," said Ardashir warmly. "No point standing on ceremony now, is there?"

Samad was glad this was so. He said as much. He took a moment to look with the necessary admiration around the room with its relentless flashes of gold, its thick pile carpet, its furnishing in various shades of yellow and green. One had to admire Ardashir's business sense. He had taken the simple idea of an Indian restaurant (small room, pink tablecloth, loud music, atrocious wallpaper, meals) and just made it bigger. He hadn't improved anything; it was the same old crap, but bigger in a bigger building in the biggest tourist trap in London. Leicester Square. You had to admire it and admire the man, who now sat like a benign locust, his slender insectile body swamped in a black leather chair, leaning over the desk, all smiles, a parasite disguised as a philanthropist.

"Cousin, what can I do for you?"

Samad took a deep breath. The matter was...what was the matter? The house was the matter. Samad was moving out of East London (where one couldn't bring up children, indeed, one couldn't, not if one didn't wish them to come to bodily harm), from East London, with its National Front gangs, to north London, north-west, in fact, where things were more...more...liberal. Ardashir's eyes glazed over a little

as Samad explained his situation. His skinny legs twitched beneath the desk, and in his fingers he manipulated a paper clip until it looked reasonably like an A. A for Ardashir.

I need only a small wage increase to help me finance the move. To make things a little easier as we settle in. And Alsana, well, she is pregnant."

Pregnant. Difficult. Ardashir realized the case called for extreme diplomacy.

"Don't mistake me, Samad, we are both intelligent, frank men and I think I can speak frankly...I know you're not a *fucking* waiter--" he whispered the expletive and smiled indulgently after it, as if it were a naughty private thing that brought them closer together, "I see your position...of course I do...but you must understand mine...If I made allowances for every relative I employ I'd be walking around like bloody Mr Gandhi. Without a pot to piss in. spinning my thread by the light of the moon. An example: at this very moment that wastrel Fat Elvis brother-in-law of mine Hussein Ishmael--"

"The butcher?"

"The butcher, demands that I should raise the price I pay for his stinking meat! 'But Ardashir, we are brothers-in-law!' he is saying to me. And I am saying to him, but Mohammed, this is retail..."

It was Samad's turn to glaze over. He thought of his wife, Alsana, who was not as meek as he had assumed when they married, to whom he must deliver the bad news. Alsana, who was prone to moments, even fits--yes, fits was not too strong a word--of rage. Cousins, aunts, brothers thought it a bad sign. They wondered if there wasn't some "funny mental history" in Alsana's family, they sympathized with him the way you sympathize with a man who has bought a stolen car with more mileage on it than first thought. In his naivety, Samad had simply assumed a woman so young would be...easy. But Alsana was not...no, she was not easy. It was, he supposed, the way with young women these days.

Ardashir came to the end of what he felt was his perfectly worded speech, sat back satisfied, and laid the *M* for Mukhul he had molded next to the *A* for Ardashir that sat on his lap.

"Thank you, Sir," said Samad. "Thank you so very much."

That evening, there was an awful row. Alsana slung the sewing machine, with the black studded hot pants she was working on, to the floor.

"Useless! Tell me, Samad Miah, what is the point of moving here--nice house, yes, very nice, very nice--but where is the food?"

"It is a nice area, we have friends here..."

"Who are they?" She slammed her little fist on to the kitchen table, sending the salt and pepper flying to collide spectacularly with each other in the air. "I don't know them! You fight in an old forgotten war with some Englishman...married to a black! Whose friends are they? These are the people my child will grow up around? Their children--half blacky-white? But tell me," she shouted, running - returning to her favorite topic, "where is our food?"

Theatrically, she threw open every cupboard in the kitchen, "Where is it? Can we eat china?"

Two plates smashed to the floor. She patted her stomach to indicate her unborn child and pointed to the pieces, "Hungry?"

Samad, who had an equally melodramatic nature when prompted, yanked open the freezer and pulled out a mountain of meat which he piled in the middle of the room. His mother worked through the night preparing meals for her family, he said. His mother did not, he said, spend the household money as Alsana did, on prepared meals, yogurts and tinned spaghetti. Alsana punched him full square in the stomach.

"Samad Iqbal the traditionalist! Why don't I just squat in the street over a bucket and wash clothes? Eh? In fact, what about my clothes? Edible?"

As Samad clutched his winded belly, there in the kitchen she ripped to shreds every stitch she had on and added them to the pile of frozen lamb, spare cuts from the restaurant. She stood naked before him for a moment, the as yet small mound of her pregnancy in full view, then put on a long, brown coat and left the house.

But all the same, she reflected, slamming the door behind her, it was a nice area; she couldn't deny it as she stormed towards the high street, avoiding pavement trees where previously, in Whitechapel, she had avoided flung-out mattresses and the homeless. It would be good for the child. Alsana had a deep-seated belief that living near green spaces was morally beneficial to the young and there to her right was Gladstone Park, a sweeping horizon of green named after the Liberal Prime Minister (Alsana was from a respected old Bengal family and had read her English History), and in the Liberal tradition it was a park without fences, unlike the more of affluent Queen's Park, (Victoria's) with its pointed metal railings. Willesden was not as pretty as Queen's Park, but it was a nice area. No denying it. No NF kids breaking the basement windows with their steel-capped boots like in Whitechapel. Now she was pregnant she needed a little bit of peace and quiet. Though it was the same here in a way; they all looked at her strangely, this tiny Indian woman stalking the high streets in a mackintosh, her plentiful hair flying every which way. *Mali's Kebabs, Mr Cheungs, Raj's, Malkovich Bakeries*--she read the new unfamiliar signs as she passed. She was shrewd. She saw what this was. "Liberal? Hosh-kosh nonsense!" No one was more liberal than anyone else anywhere anyway. It was only that here, in Willesden, there wasn't enough of any one thing to gang up against any other thing and send it running to the cellars while windows were smashed.

"Survival is what it is about!" she concluded out loud (she spoke to her baby: she liked to give it one sensible thought a day), making the bell above Crazy Shoes tinkle as she opened the door. Her niece Neena worked here. It was an old-fashioned cobbler's. Neena affixed heels back on to stilettos.

"Alsana, you look like dog shit," Neena called over in Bengali. "What is that horrible coat?"

"It's none of your business what it is," replied Alsana in English. "I came to collect my husband's shoes, not to chit-chat with Niece-of-Shame."

Neena was used to this, and now Alsana had moved to Willesden, there would only be more of it. It used to come in longer sentences (such as "Niece, you have brought nothing but shame..."), but now because Alsana no longer had the time or energy to summon up the necessary shock each time, it had become abridged to Niece-of-Shame, an all-purpose tag that summed up the general feeling.



"See these shoes - see these soles?" said Neena, taking Samad's shoes off the shelf and handing Alsana the little blue ticket. "They were so worn through, Aunty Alsi, I had to reconstruct them from the very base. From the base!" What does he do in them? Run marathons?"

"He works, replied Alsana tersely. "And prays," she added, for she liked to make a point of her respectability, and besides, she was really very traditional, very religious, lacking nothing except the faith.

"And don't call me Aunty, I'm only two years older than you."

Alsana swept the shoes into a plastic carrier bag and turned to leave.

"I thought that praying was done on people's knees," said Neena, laughing lightly.

"Both, both, asleep, waking, walking," snapped Alsana, as she passed under the tinkly bell once more. "We are never out of sight of the Creator."

"How is the new house, then?" Neena called after her.

But she had gone. Neena shook her head and sighed as she watched her young aunt disappear down the road like a little brown bullet. Alsana. She was young and old at the same time, Neena reflected. She acted so sensible, so straight-down-the-line in her long, sensible coat, but you got the feeling--

"Oi! Miss! There's shoes back here that need your attention!" came a voice from the storeroom.

"Keep your tits on," said Neena.

At the corner of the road, Alsana popped behind the post office and removed her pinchy sandals in favor of Samad's shoes. (It was an oddity about Alsana. She was small, but her feet were enormous, as if she had more growing to do.) In seconds she whipped her hair into an efficient bun, and wrapped her coat tighter around her to keep out the wind. Then she set off, past the library and up a long green road she had never walked along before. "Survival is all, Little Iqbal," she said to her bump once more. "Survival."

Clara was also pregnant. When their bumps became too large and cinema seats no longer accommodated them, the two women began to meet up for lunch in Kilburn Park, often with the Niece-of-Shame, the three of them squeezed onto a generous bench, Alsana pressing a thermos of PG Tips into Clara's hand, without milk, with lemon. Unwrapping several layers of cling film to reveal today's peculiar delight: savory dough-like balls, crumbly Indian sweets shot through with the colors of the kaleidoscope, thin pastry with spiced beef inside, salad with onion, she says to Clara: "Eat up! Stuff yourself silly! They're in there, wallowing around in your belly, waiting for the menu. Woman, don't torture them! You want to starve the bumps?" for despite appearances, there are six people on that bench (three living, three coming); one girl for Clara, two boys for Alsana.

Alsana says: "Nobody's complaining, let's get that straight. A boy is good and two boys is bloody good. But I tell you, when I turned my head and saw the ultra-business thingummybob--"

"Ultrasound," corrects Clara through a mouthful of rice.

"--Yes, I almost had the heart attack to finish me off! Two! Feeding one is enough."

Clara laughs and says she can imagine Samad's face when he saw it.

"No, dearie,"--Alsana is reproofing, tucking her large feet underneath the folds of her sari, "he didn't see anything. He wasn't there. I'm not letting him see things like that. A woman has to have the private things--a husband needn't be involved in body-business, in a lady's...*parts*."

Niece-Of-Shame, who is sitting between them, sucks her teeth.

"Bloody hell, Alsi, he must have been involved in your parts sometime, or is this the immaculate bloody conception?"

"So rude," says Alsana to Clara in a snotty, English way. "Too old to be so rude and too young to know any better." And then Clara and Alsana, with the accidental mirroring that happens when two people are sharing the same experience, both lay their hands on their bulges.

Neena, to redeem herself: "Yeah, well, how are you doing on names? Any ideas?"

Alsana is decisive. "*Magid* and *Millat*. Ems are good. Ems are strong. Mahatma, Mohammed, that funny Mr Morecambe, from Morecambe and Wise--letter you can trust."

But Clara is more cautious, because naming seems to her a fearful responsibility, a godlike task for a mere mortal: "I think I like *Irie*. It patois. Means everything OK, cool, peaceful, you know?"

Alsana is mock horrified before the sentence is finished. "'OK?' This is a name for a child? You might as well call her 'Wouldsirlike-anypopadumswiththat?' or 'Niceweatherwearehaving'--"

"...And Archie likes Sarah. Well, there not much you can argue with Sarah, but there's not much to get happy about either. I suppose if it was good enough for the wife of Abraham..."

"Ibrahim," Alsana corrects, out of instinct more than Koranic pedantry. "Popping out babies when she was a hundred years old, by the grace of Allah."

And then Neena, groaning at the turn the conversation is taking: "Well. I *like* Irie. It's funky. It's different."

Alsana loves this: "For pity's sake, what does Archibald know about *funky* and *different*? If I were you, dearie," she says, patting Clara's knee, "I'd choose Sarah and let that be an end to it. Sometimes you have to let these men have it their way. Anything for a little--how do you say it in the English? for a little--" she puts her finger over tightly pursed lips, like a guard at the gate, "--*shush*."

But in response Niece-Of-Shame bats her voluminous eyelashes, wraps her college scarf round her head like purdah, and says, "Oh yes, Auntie, yes, the little submissive Indian woman. You don't talk to him, he talks at you. You scream and shout at each other, but there's no communication. And in the end he wins anyway, because he does whatever he likes when he likes. You don't even know where he is, what he does, what he *feels*, half the time. It's 1975, Alsi. You can't conduct relationships like that anymore. It's not like back home. There has to be communication between men and women in the West, they've got to listen to each other, otherwise..." Neena mimes a small mushroom cloud going off in her hand.

"What a load of the codswallop," says Alsana sonorously, closing her eyes, shaking her head. "It is you who do not listen. By Allah, I will always give as good as I get. But you presume I *care* what he does. You presume I want to know. The truth is for a marriage to survive, you don't need all this talk, talk, talk; all this 'I am this' and 'I am really like this' like on the television, all this revelation--especially when your

husband is old, when he is wrinkly and falling apart--you do not *want* to know what is slimy underneath the bed and rattling in the wardrobe."

Neena frowns. Clara cannot raise serious objection, and the rice is handed around once more.

"Moreover," says Alsana after a pause, folding her dimpled arms underneath her breasts, pleased to be holding forth on a subject close to this formidable bosom, "when you are from families such as ours you should have learned that *silence*, what is *not* said, is the very *best* recipe for family life."

"So let me get this straight," says Neena derisively. "You're saying that a good dose of repression keeps a marriage healthy?"

And as if someone had pressed a button, Alsana is outraged: "Repression! Nonsense, silly-billy word! I'm just talking about common sense. What is my husband? What is yours?" she says pointing to Clara. "25 years they lived before we're even born. What are they? What are they capable of? What blood do they have on their hands? What is sticky and smelly in their private areas? Who knows?" She throws her hands up, releasing the questions into the unhealthy Kilburn air, sending a troop of sparrows up with them.

"What you don't understand, my Niece-of-Shame, what none of your generation understand--"

"But Auntie," begs Neena, raising her voice, because this is what she really wants to argue about--the largest sticking point between the two of them--Alsana's arranged marriage, "How could you bear to marry someone you didn't know from Adam?"

In response, an infuriating wink. Alsana always likes to appear jovial at the very moment that her interlocutor becomes hot under the collar. "Because, *Miss Smarty-pants*, it is by far the easier option. It was exactly because Eve did not know Adam from Adam that they got on so A-OK. Let me explain. Yes, I was married to Samad Iqbal the same evening of the very day I met him. Yes, I didn't know him from Adam. But I liked him well enough. We met in the breakfast room on a steaming Dhaka day and he fanned me with *The Times*. I thought he had a good face, a sweet voice and his backside was high and well formed for a man of his age. Very good. But now every time I learn something more about him, I *like him less*. So, you see, we were better off the way we were."

Neena stamps her foot in exasperation at the skewed logic.

--Besides, I will never know him well. Getting anything out of my husband is like trying to squeeze water out when you're stoned."

Neena laughs despite herself, "Water out of a stone."

"Yes, yes you think I'm so stupid but I'm wise about things like men. I tell you," Alsana prepares to deliver her summation as she had seen it done many years previously by the young Dhaka lawyers with their slick side-partings, "men are the last mystery. God is easy compared with men.

Now, enough of the philosophy. Samosa?"

She peels the lid off the plastic tub and sits fat, pretty and satisfied on her conclusion.

"Shame that you're having them," says Neena to her aunt, lighting a fag. "Boys, I mean. Shame that you're going to have boys."

"What do you mean?" This is Clara who has secretly subscribed (a secret from Alsana and Archie) to a lending library of Neena's through which she has read, in a few short months, *The Female Eunuch* by Greer, *Sex, Race and Class* by Selma James and Jong's *Fear of Flying* all in a clandestine attempt, on Neena's part, to rid Clara of her "false consciousness."

"I mean, I just think men have caused enough chaos in this century. There's enough bloody men in the world. If I knew I was going to have a boy..." she pauses to prepare her two falsely conscious friends for this new concept, "I would have to seriously consider abortion."

Alsana screams, claps her hands over one of her own ears and one of Clara's, and then almost chokes on a piece of aubergine with the physical exertion. For some reason the remark simultaneously strikes Clara as funny: hysterically, desperately funny, miserably funny; and the Niece-Of-Shame sits between them, nonplussed, while the two egg-shaped women bend over themselves, one in laughter, the other in horror and near asphyxiation.

"Are you all right ladies?" It is Sol Jozefowicz, the park keeper, standing in front of them, ready as always to be of aid.

"We are all going to burn in hell, Mr. Jozefowicz, if you call that being all right..." explains Alsana, pulling herself together.

Niece-Of-Shame rolls her eyes: "Speak for yourself."

But Alsana is faster than any sniper when it comes to firing back, "I do I do--thankfully, Allah has arranged it that way."

"Good afternoon Neena, good afternoon, Mrs. Jones," says Sol, offering a neat bow to each. "Are you sure you are all right? Mrs. Jones?"

Clara cannot stop the tears from squeezing out of the corners of her eyes. She cannot work out, at this moment, whether she is crying or laughing; the two states suddenly seem only a stone's throw from each other.

"I'm fine, fine. Sorry to have worried you, Mr Jozefowicz. Really, I'm fine."

"I do not see what is so very funny-funny," mutters Alsana. "The murder of innocents--is this funny?"

"Not in my experiences, Mrs. Iqbal, no," says Sol Jozefowicz in the collected manner in which he says everything, passing his handkerchief to Clara. It strikes all three women--the way history will: embarrassingly, without warning, like a blush--what the park keeper's experience might have been. They fall silent.

"Well, as long as you ladies are fine, I'll be getting on," says Sol, motioning that Clara can keep the handkerchief and replacing the hat that he had removed in the old fashion. He bows his neat little bow once more, and sets off slowly anticlockwise around the park.

Once Sol is out of earshot, Neena says: "OK, Aunty Alsi. I apologize. apologize...what more do you want?"

"Oh, every-bloody-thing," says Alsana, her voice losing the fight, becoming vulnerable.

00:44:25 Robyn Warhol

"The whole bloody universe made clear--in a little nutshell. I cannot understand a thing anymore, and I'm just beginning. You understand?"

She sighs, not waiting for an answer, not looking at Neena, but across the way at the hunched, disappearing figure of Sol, winding in and out of the yew trees. "You may be right about Samad...about many things...maybe there are no good men, not even the two in this belly...and maybe I do not talk enough with mine, maybe I have married a stranger...you might see the truth better than I...what do I know, a barefoot country girl who never went to the universities..."

"Oh, Alsi," Neena keeps saying, weaving her regret in and out of Alsana's words like tapestry, feeling bad. "You know I didn't mean it like that."

"But I cannot be worrying-worrying all the time about the truth. I have to worry about the truth that can be lived with. And that is the difference between losing your marbles drinking the salty sea, or swallowing the stuff from the streams. My Niece-Of-Shame believes in the talking cure, eh?" says Alsana, with something of a grin. "Talk, talk, talk and it'll be better. Be honest, slice open your heart and spread the red stuff around. But the past is made of more than words, dearie. We married old men, you see? "These bumps," Alsana pats them both, "they will always have Daddy-long-legs for fathers. One leg in the present, one in the past. No talking will change this. Their roots will always be tangled."

Just as he reaches the far gate, Sol Jozefowicz turns round to wave, and the three women wave back. And Clara feels a little theatrical, flying the park keeper's cream handkerchief above her head. As if she is seeing someone off on a train journey which crosses the border of two countries.

00:46:16 Jim Phelan

Thank you Robyn. So you know, as we noted before you read the story, Zadie Smith incorporated it into her novel *White Teeth*. Do you think this story works as a standalone piece?

00:46:34 Robyn Warhol

Oh, I definitely do. I mean, I guess I read the novel before I read this as a short story, so I didn't have the experience of having to sort out very quickly who all these characters are, but I think that she's pretty careful in the beginning of this story to set out what their relationships are. It's - it's a - it's a good strategy to start this at the time when the Iqbals arrive in England, and so that the - the - the relationships between the husbands, the relationship between the wives are - are established, and then you know she's also very conscientious in - in this story about identifying the relationship with -each per - each subsequent character to - to the Iqbals.

00:47:14 Jim Phelan

Right.

00:47:16 Robyn Warhol

So I think it's not confusing and I think that it does have the shape of the classic English short story.

00:47:19 Jim Phelan

Right.

00:47:23 Robyn Warhol

By which I mean that, you - you know, it - it follows the - the typical exposition, sort of rising action, moment - there are a couple of moments of crisis, I would say and then comes, I think, to a resolution and an epiphany in the very most traditional sense.

00:47:43 Jim Phelan

Yeah yeah, maybe we could talk a little bit more about that, the - the way she organizes things. You - you talked about, you know, this kind of exposition, rising action, epiphany, climax. It strikes me too that it's really a story that's built on scenes, right, after we get the initial exposition. We have, like the two scenes in the restaurant, you know, focused with - on Samad, and then we have the scene with Samad and Alsana, then we have Alsana by herself, and - and that sort of refund counter with Neena back to herself. And then we have the longest scene with the three women, right?

00:48:28 Robyn Warhol

The three women, yeah.

00:48:30 Jim Phelan

So I mean, it's also interesting in terms of, you know, duration that that's - that scene where you see the epiphany come is the - the final scene, right?

00:48:40 Robyn Warhol

Yeah, that's a - that's a good point. It is definitely the longest scene, and in fact, as I read aloud, I was surprised that there was so much there about Samad, from Samad's point of view, as contrasted with Alsana's, because when I think about this story and it is called "The Waiter's Wife," right? So Smith explains to us what it means that he's a waiter, which is that he's not a waiter, but that he has to be a waiter, and then what it means for her to be his wife, and then you know, this exploration of what exactly that means for her. To me, that's - that's what the story is mainly about, and the rest of it is, you know, very beautifully laid out context.

00:49:17 Jim Phelan

Yeah, yeah.

00:49:18 Robyn Warhol

But what you say about scenes, I think, is really important. This is a very witty narrator. I think that - that Zadie Smith's narrator is a lot like Jane Austen's, in that she'll use free indirect discourse and kind of, you know, she'll - she'll be using the character's language without marking it with quotation marks, sometimes, often in a mocking way.

00:49:36 Jim Phelan

Right.

00:49:39 Robyn Warhol

Very Jane Austen, and she doesn't tell you what to think about the characters. She dramatizes them so that there's something kind of cinematic, I would say, about - about the way the story operates. It would be very easy to film it, because it's all conversation.

00:49:54 Jim Phelan

Yeah, so much of it is and I think the the use of the, you know, dominant sort of internal focalization, free indirect discourse and so on, makes some of the, you know, sort of instances where she, the narrator, speaks from her own perspective in her own voice, kind of stand out. So like in - in the scene in the park, right, after Sol Jozefowicz says, not in my experience, you know, about the - the murder of innocents, we get this I, I think, really remarkable sentence, right? "It strikes all three women, dash, the way history will, embarrassingly, without warning like a blush, end of dash, what the park keeper's experience might have been." Right?

00:50:48 Robyn Warhol

Yeah I love that yeah, and that's the - that's the epiphany.

00:50:48 Jim Phelan

So we're - we're in there.

00:50:51 Robyn Warhol

That's the moment, yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:50:52 Jim Phelan

Yeah, yeah, and the narrator's saying this is history, right?

00:50:54 Robyn Warhol

Yeah yeah, yeah.

00:50:55 Jim Phelan

I mean, making that - and so that, that melding of their perspective and her perspective is really quite striking, I think.

00:51:03 Robyn Warhol

Yeah, yeah I would say so, especially since in - in - in previous moments I can think of where the narrator speaks, she is speaking more mockingly, and one of my favorites is that - her - her description of Alsana as really very traditional, she has everything. She was really very traditional, very religious, lacking nothing except the faith. Right?

00:51:24 Jim Phelan

Yeah, right.

00:51:25 Robyn Warhol

That's not Alsana's thought, right? That's - that's the narrator's judgment of her and I, I think that being her more typical way of - of -of commenting on the characters, that makes this moment of what seems like really sincere revelation about - about the importance of history, and about how the - their - their awareness of world history, their - their common knowledge about the Holocaust and that - that - that this name, Sol Jozefowicz, that Sol means Jewish and Jozefowicz means Eastern European, that they know that, they all know that, they - and - and that -

00:52:00 Jim Phelan

Right, right, right. Right.

00:52:03 Robyn Warhol

So that it's not - she doesn't need to go into one character's mind here. It's a moment where all three characters' minds come together. The three women have been bickering, bickering, bickering, right?

00:52:13 Jim Phelan

Right.

00:52:15 Robyn Warhol

They're - they're speaking from such different positions.

00:52:18 Jim Phelan

Right.

00:52:19 Robyn Warhol

It's almost it's almost just to entertain themselves, right? That's what they do, right? But then - but then this, this, this moment of revelation, where they realize, oh, you know some things are more important,

00:52:32 Jim Phelan

Right, and there's a collective - a collective recognition there.

00:52:38 Robyn Warhol

Right, they have that recognition, all three together, and it's a - and that's the thing then, that - that leads to the reconciliation that is the denouement of the story. It's what leads - it's what leads Niece-Of-Shame to say, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way.

00:52:52 Jim Phelan

Yeah, yeah.

00:52:52 Robyn Warhol

And - and for that- for their friendship really to be, kind of, reconstituted, re-knitted-up that way.

00:53:00 Jim Phelan



Yeah, yeah. A couple, I think, more things. It's really rich and I - I'm - I'm glad you're - you're already, sort of, pulling out so much about the richness of that. One is the way in which the appearance of Sol Jozefowicz sort of links to what you were saying before you read the story, right, about Willesden and, as sort of this place of multiculturalism, and so on, right? And I mean, you know, we've been focused on Alsana and Clara, and, you know, Samad, and that - their - their community, and then we - now we have someone from out - outside in a sense, right? And which but also part of it, right? So that adds something, I think. I think it shouldn't.

00:53:45 Robyn Warhol

Well, but - but Clara is not from the same ethnic community that the Iqbals are from, and Archie isn't either right.

00:53:49 Jim Phelan

No, that's right, yeah.

00:53:53 Robyn Warhol

He's white, she's - she's Jamaican. So we already have a sense of this multiplicity just in these - these two main families, but - but they are all - those are families that are marked by what I was calling postcolonialism, right? And that kind of hybridity whereas Sol Jozefowicz is is there for a completely different reason, not because England ever conquered Eastern Europe, not because he comes from a - from a postcolonial setting and is coming back, you know, to the center, right, of empire. He's there as a refugee from, you know, the most horrible thing that happened in that century.

00:54:31 Jim Phelan

Yeah, right.

00:54:31 Robyn Warhol

So, so you - you know, you - you can get caught up in in feeling like, oh, yes, well, there's this community, which are these people who know each other, right, but - but it's much more diverse than that, and I think that's what you're seeing. Yeah.

00:54:42 Jim Phelan

Yeah, yeah, right right. This is part of the Dream City too, this heritage, right?

00:54:46 Robyn Warhol

Right, right, right, right.

00:54:47 Jim Phelan

And - and this is where they are. Yeah. Yeah. So, one of the other things, you know, that's interesting in that final scene, is, sort of, the way in which she uses so much dialogue, right and - and then I think that raises the question, is there - is Smith sort of, guiding her audience to take a side here or not, or is it the dialogue itself that's you know, being, you know, sort of in a Bakhtinian sense, let's, let's have, you

know, each voice have its articulation of its position, and - and then we don't have to decide, choose a side. Or, you know, say one is privileged, or something like that.

00:55:38 Robyn Warhol

I think - I think that's interesting, 'cause in - in a story like this one, voice is more than just the utterance of a single subject, right? And that's because for Alsana, she's speaking in translation of her thoughts. She - she's not comfortable yet enough in English that - that the thoughts come to her in English, and so that's why she has all these funny little expressions, and, like, weird ways of repeating words and sentences that you wouldn't do in English, but perhaps you would do in her native language. So her voice, it's, it's, it's an emanation from her, but it's also a very strongly reflection of her cultural position, right as a postcolonial subject. Clara speaks patois, and it was - I told you before we did this, it was hard to know how to read that. I can't do that Jamaican accent, so I didn't try to. But Zadie Smith spells it out very clearly that Clara doesn't say them, She says dem with a D, and - and Smith keeps that really consistent, right, so that you're consciously aware of the different geographical positions from which these women are speaking. It's not just about personality, and it isn't even just about culture. It's about place.

00:56:51 Jim Phelan

Right, right.

00:56:53 Robyn Warhol

So that the fact that there's so much dialogue, I think, is - is partly there to remind you of that without the narrator having to keep saying it and saying it. But you ask if the fact that the three of them are given kind of equal time, if that means that we're not - by we you mean, sort of, the author's intended audience - maybe aren't supposed to come down on one side or another. I do think that Alsana is always ridiculous. She's - her - the melodrama and the extremes, and the rage, whether it's real or - or - or performed, right, it's - that's, that's who she is and it's - it's difficult to sympathize with her. And yet you know, in the in the end when she says, oh, really, I don't know anything, you know. That - that maybe gives her a little bit more authority than she's had throughout the rest of that dialogue when she's been asserting all these outrageous statements.

00:57:51 Jim Phelan

Yes, yeah good. I think that movement is noticeable. The other thing that I'll ask you about in that connection, then, is the - when she's on her own, right, and she talks to, you know, the child that she's -

00:58:06 Robyn Warhol

Oh yeah, she talks to Little Iqbal, yeah, yeah.

00:58:09 Jim Phelan

Survival, survival. That's - that - there, I guess, I - I read that as she's not ridiculous, right? There's - there is something, you know, more than just, OK, this odd thing of -

00:58:21 Robyn Warhol

Well, it's - it's literally true, but on the other hand, what has she done in that scene that was to promote her own survival? I mean she's - all the - all the drama in the house about there's no food there, is false, there's food, there, right? It's all - there's all this frozen meat on the floor in the living room now, right?

00:58:40 Jim Phelan

Yeah, yeah.

00:58:40 Robyn Warhol

Which actually will have the effect to make it more difficult to survive, until - until Samad can bring home some more leftover food from the - from the restaurant. Taking off all her clothes, putting on a raincoat and running outside, that's, that's not the act of someone who's focused on survival. So it almost seems to me like a kind of litany that she's repeating to herself, rather than a sincere statement.

00:59:02 Jim Phelan

OK. OK, yeah.

00:59:06 Robyn Warhol

And then when you read the whole novel and you see the way she actually relates to her children, you see that again and again, that, you know, it's difficult for her to, like, sincerely advise them because she's constantly in this state of outrage.

00:59:18 Jim Phelan

Yeah, OK. So I think, too, in that - in that - the treatment of Alsana and her own, you know expressions at various times, like, you know, trying to squeeze water out when you're stoned, things like that, I mean, it gets at that humor, which you - which you touched on before, but maybe there's - there's more to say about that, you know, just what the, sort of, the different sources of it, maybe, in - in the story. So we have some of these expressions, yeah?

00:59:51 Robyn Warhol

Oh, of the humor you mean. Oh yeah, yeah, a lot of the humor is at - is at Alsana's expense. In that it's her - her extravagant behavior and then her malapropisms. And the malapropism, being, of course again a great old British comic tradition, right? People who get British words or British expressions wrong all the way back, what is Mrs. Malaprop, is that 18th century, is it 17th? I don't even remember, but it's a - it's an old comic device.

01:00:17 Jim Phelan

Yeah, right. Right, yeah.

01:00:22 Robyn Warhol

That that's - that that's part of the humor, but - and also what I was saying before about that kind of Jane Austen-like commentary that you get from the narrator, that the narrator is very witty and so a lot of the humor is there too.

01:00:36 Jim Phelan

Right, right. Yeah, I mean one of my favorites is the, Eve did not know Adam from Adam.

01:00:42 Robyn Warhol

Yes, exactly! And that's - actually Alsana's witty, right? I mean that's a very clever thing to say. She's very quick to come back with that. You didn't know him from Adam. Well, Eve didn't know Adam from Adam either.

01:00:47 Jim Phelan

Yeah, that is right yeah, yeah. Yeah, and that one seems like a little different from, you know, the the squeeze water out when you're stoned.

01:01:01 Robyn Warhol

Oh, absolutely. It's not a mistake. It's not a malapropism at all.

01:01:04 Jim Phelan

Yeah, yeah.

01:01:05 Robyn Warhol

It's a joke, it's a - and it's a rhetorical point. You know, she's - she is in her - in her peculiar way, she is very deft at argument, and whether she herself thought that was funny or not, it certainly - it strikes me as very funny.

01:01:21 Jim Phelan

Yeah. One of the other big things, obviously, in this story, that I'd be really interested to hear your thoughts on is the way in which Smith handles the relationships between genders, right? And also - and that's connected to the organization right? And we have so much focus on.

01:01:42 Robyn Warhol

And that it's so - so clearly divided, right? The story is really bifurcated, you know, here's the men's world. And here's the women's world and - and yeah. Yeah, yeah.

01:01:51 Jim Phelan

Right. And of course, the - in the women's world, they talk about the men. You know.

01:01:58 Robyn Warhol

And in the novel, the men talk about the women some, but it's certainly not in the story. That's not what it's about here, it's just about making a living, and you don't get Archie so much as a character here.

01:02:07 Jim Phelan

No, right.

01:02:07 Robyn Warhol

And he's an important character in the novel.

01:02:09 Jim Phelan

Right.

01:02:10 Robyn Warhol

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

01:02:12 Robyn Warhol

But - but that - I think that the way that I would see that bifurcation is that the first half of the story, you could say it's about men, but I say it's about social class, and then the second half is more about gender in that - in - in that it becomes the explicit topic of their discussion.

01:02:30 Jim Phelan

OK.

01:02:31 Robyn Warhol

The - the - to me, the purpose of that first half is to demonstrate the - it's beyond conflict, it's humiliation that - that - that Samad experiences coming from a place where he was all these things, a student, a scientist, a soldier, to a place where he's nothing but a waiter, right, and the lowest of the low in a crummy restaurant in Leicester Square, in a tourist trap.

01:02:55 Jim Phelan

Working for his cousin who loves that he's working for him.

01:02:57 Robyn Warhol

Right, right. Yeah, the - the cousin is taking so much glee, you know, just vicious glee in that because he's always envied Samad. I mean, really, it's - it's a - it's a complete humiliation, and it's about social class. He had a different class in Bangladesh, and - and he'll never rise to that class in England. He can't, because the - the class stratification is so strong. He was able to rise from Whitechapel, where the National Front thugs are kicking in the windows of the basements, and - and you know, and scaring families to death. He's able to make the move from there to the more, kind of, suburban-like Willesden, but - so he could, he can rise a little in England, but he can never rise out of the class of being a waiter. He's stuck and so - and I think the - all the abuse from Shiva, I mean, I think Shiva's speeches are hilarious. He's so mean. He's so mean, but he's funny.

01:03:58 Jim Phelan

Yeah, the mocking - the mocking of -

01:03:59 Robyn Warhol

The mockery, the mockery, that - just the intensity of the put down. There's also, of course, in that scene, the element of religious difference and, and I think that Smith is doing that on purpose too, that there's a Hindu among the Muslims working in this restaurant, and he's there because he's so very good at what he does that they overlook the fact that he's - he's Hindu and not Muslim.

01:04:19 Jim Phelan

Right. Religious difference, right.

01:04:23 Robyn Warhol

And - but that there's - there's also that same kind of snobbishness, right? I mean, back in the home country, right, between Hindus who tend to be of the higher class, as Muslims, who might tend to be less - less socially exalted. You know, that - that there's - it's a complicated history that is playing itself out in that scene, and that also is very important, because what Smith is - is reminding us as you go to an Indian restaurant, there's all these Indian guys serving you, but they're not the same guy, and they're not the same ethnicity, and they're not the same religion, and they're not - they're not the same community, even, right?

01:05:02 Jim Phelan

Right.

01:05:03 Robyn Warhol

So, so you know, we may - white people may generalize about immigrants, or generalize about South Asian immigrants, or even generalize about Bangladeshi immigrants, and we still could be wrong because there are more differences than are obvious to anybody from the outside.

01:05:15 Jim Phelan

Yeah.

01:05:21 Robyn Warhol

So to me, that's what that first part is about. And it is - it is Samad's manhood, basically, that's being - that's being disparaged.

01:05:32 Jim Phelan

Yeah, and I mean I think the - you know, it's kind of a classic male competition played out in different ways, right?

01:05:39 Robyn Warhol

Sure, yeah, yeah.

01:05:40 Jim Phelan

Shiva, and then Ardashir and Samad,

01:05:42 Robyn Warhol

And then with Ardashir too.

01:05:44 Jim Phelan

It's very much, you know, you could see the testosterone, almost, you know.

01:05:48 Robyn Warhol

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And then it's true that estrogen is running wild in this last scene, right, with these two pregnant ladies, right.

01:05:57 Jim Phelan

Right.

01:05:58 Robyn Warhol

And - and the highly sexualized Neena, I mean, the fact that what she does is put stiletto heels back on stilettos, right? And that - and that she's such a modern woman, and that she's been giving Clara all this - all this feminist literature, including erotica, right, *Fear of Flying*, was this, you know, really sexy bestseller in the 70s. There's - there's, you know, it's highly hormonal, I'd say, that - that scene with those women. And - so that - that also goes deeper than just the fact that they're discussing the roles of men, the roles of women, what a marriage should be like, what a traditional woman is, what a modern woman is.

01:06:40 Jim Phelan

Yeah, sure yeah. One other thing I want to be sure we get to before we wrap up is the way in which the story also, you know, brings in the idea of generations. So partly that the men are 25 years older. You know we have the women. Then we have the, you know, pregnant women. The, you know, the references to Daddy long-legs and, you know, all that. And so, how might that play into some - again, some of the things you were saying about, you know, the immigration experience, the diversity, the multiculturalism, the - the idea, OK, now these children will be born in England, et cetera?

01:07:32 Robyn Warhol

Yeah, that they will be, they'll be, they'll be Brits, these children, right? Whether she's called Irie or Sarah, she will be an English child, and whether and - and - and and, I forget, Milatt and - Magid, they - they will be they'll be Bangladeshi-English and - and Irie will be Black English, and - and that - that's that brings with it a whole bunch of more. Assumptions and - and institutional racism, and complicated oppressions and relationships and also opportunities, right, that - that being first-generation immigrants did not carry with them. And I - I like the way - and this is - it's just the way it would happen, but I like the way the names kind of play out this story of this mixing and this - the - what happens in the new generation, that, that Clara, who's Jamaican, marries Archie Jones, who's - his name is Jones, it's like Smith. I mean, I like to imagine this as being Zadie Smith thinking about her own roots, that Jones is such a generic British-Welsh name, so now she's Clara Jones, and her child will be Irie Jones, so, you know, definitely that mix of the Caribbean and the - and the British, and that - and - and that Samad and Alsana, even though they're giving Bangladeshi names to their sons, are also producing now a generation of English people, right? And, and this is what I love about this story being in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, is that this is English literature. This is what English literature is now, right?

01:09:28 Jim Phelan

Absolutely yeah.

01:09:30 Robyn Warhol

That the - the - the - really - I mean Zadie Smith was born in 1975. She's not a young woman anymore, right? This isn't new fiction, right? This is the tradition now of - of contemporary British fiction, and so - and that thinking about the generations, you know, now Magid and Millat's children are around, and maybe even - even longer. That that's what England is now, and that's - and that's what London is, and what she's talking about, the Dream City, and that - and if there's a message, I think it's - well, I would say there are two. There's the message that comes with the - the - that epiphany, that there are certain facts of history that everybody has in common in our - in our conscience, right our collective conscience, regardless of where we might come from or how we might identify. But also that there's no one in this story who's just one thing, that it's - it's profoundly intersectional. You can't understand Alsana's gender without also understanding her nationality, her social class, and - and her marital status, her sexuality. It's - the same is true of every character in the story, and even of the action, that - that unless you're thinking in these very split ways, you can't comprehend it.

01:10:50 Jim Phelan

Yeah. Right. Yeah. Very good. OK. Robyn, anything else you want to touch on that we haven't gotten to?

01:10:57 Robyn Warhol

I don't think so.

01:10:58 Jim Phelan

Yeah, no, that was great. So thank you so much.

01:11:03 Robyn Warhol

Thank you Jim. That was really fun to do.

01:11:05 Jim Phelan

Yeah, and to our audience, thank you for listening. We're happy to receive feedback on our Facebook page for Project Narrative, also on our Twitter account, which is @pnOhioState. I also want to invite you to listen in to our January podcast. Angus Fletcher will be reading "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien, and Angus and I will discuss that. So happy holidays everyone.