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## **KEEPING ALL OPTIONS OPEN: ZADIE SMITH'S ALEX-LI TANDEM AND CONTEMPORARY LIFE STRATEGIES**

*If the modern 'problem of identity' was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open. (Bauman, 1995)*

Apart from the ruptures and raptures of multiethnic urban cohabitation during our liquid times, freeing the subject from a fixed, solid and essentially static sense of identity seems to be the focal centre of interest in contemporary London literature. Social and moral pluralism aided by corporate culture and consumerism create a cultural context in which flexibility and adaptability are not only welcome but often viewed as necessary qualities, without which it is difficult to succeed. On the other hand, globalisation and contemporary migratory patterns undermine the easy alignment of traditional loyalties, the more so that besides the local, regional, national or diasporic ties one may experience a multitude of associate identities including these relating to communities of taste or of friends. What is more, in a multiethnic environment, pluralism and cultural cross-fertilisation can also inspire oppositional readings of apparent 'civilisationism' or 'culture clash,' subverting modern, but now seeming rather outdated, conceptions of cultural identity. It is these oppositional readings of cultural or civilisational difference that enable honest multilateral dialogues and negotiations and that are capable of staving off the growth of intellectual apartheid or social unrest in the city which is becoming famous world-over for its multicultural arts. In addition, despite a new currency gained by religious fundamentalism, orthodox and reactionary stances on public or community relations, they appear incapable of commanding sufficient support in multiethnic London today to destabilise a sense of multiculturalism, which albeit accompanied by multiracisms, is understood as a contemporary predicament *not* leading to, contrary to Enoch Powell's wistful dire predictions, 'rivers of blood.' In such a climate, cultural defensiveness and the hiding behind the demarcation lines mapped out by identity politics, even if they do not remain uncommon, also seem

*passé* not only to the vanguard of intellectual thought but to an increasingly wider audiences and to a growing number of city-dwellers who learn from their own daily experience that it is good to keep one's options open in many more ways than one.

Having looked at the strategies of dealing with the institutional side of present-day notions of identity in recent London literature in their situational and performative aspects, which make preserving some kind of existential integrity possible, even if there are no apparent strategies which would guarantee avoiding its pitfalls,<sup>1</sup> I would like to offer a less social and less issue-laden reading of identity today proposed by Zadie Smith in her second novel *The Autograph Man* (2003), which is often analysed in postmodern terms. Urszula Terentowicz-Fotyga, for example, observes that: *A fluid sense of identity in The Autograph Man is not so much an effect of migration and displacement as of problematic experience of reality* (Terentowicz-Fotyga, 2008:57). The novel is therefore seen as postmodern because the quests described are even more tentative and the results even less conclusive than in much recent London fiction. At the same time however, a clear-cut distinction between *The Autograph Man* and the other contemporary London-based novels could not be seen as feasible because some of Alex-Li Tandem's dilemmas are also experienced by other characters like Shahid in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* (1995), Dele in Diran Adebayo's *Some Kind of Black* (1997) or Tanya in Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Haha HeeHee* (1999) to name just a few. Also, many of the issues like religion, relationships, friendships, generation or the demands of others resurface in Smith's novel just as in many other current literary works from the British capital, even if in a slightly different form and configuration.

## **The Zen and the Kabbalah of Alex-Li**

Like 'The Gospel According to Shug' in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* (1990:287–9), the two books of Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man* outline a lived religion. But unlike Alice Walker's characters who, forging new identities, won their hard battles for dignity and self-determination, Zadie Smith's Alex-Li Tandem seems to be 'merely' *testing* his identity as well as the patience of his friends. Firstly, Shug Avery, a blues singer and Miss Celie's best friend, who fostered the impressive transformation of the heroine in *The Color Purple* from a household drudge into a new model of (African-American) womanhood and a cultural icon whose influence went far beyond her fictional and cinematographic life, like all extraordinary women in the novel, had learned

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the second part of as yet unpublished book *Liquid City* – 'Spoilt for Choice: Individuation of Identity Politics.'

the hard way. One novel later, empowered by her new status and new lifestyle, she formulated her Gospel published in a pamphlet form, endorsing for instance the inclusive spirituality of 'one love.' The younger generation of Mama Celie's granddaughter Fanny in Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* see Mama Shug and Mama Celie as matrons and wise women whose experience can guide. Also, unlike 'The Gospel According to Shug,' 'The Zen -' and 'The Kabbalah of Alex-Li Tandem' do not offer unity, faith and empowerment in the traditional sense of these words. Rather than imparting certainties and wisdom in an identity strengthening manner, the Zen and the Kabbalah describe Alex's struggle with his identities (experienced in the plural) as well as his wonderment at the world. The two books of Smith's novel provide a certain model too perhaps, but of very different life strategies. They express more ephemeral and intuitive confidence of the 'until further notice' type because Tandem's Kabbalah is like a labyrinth of his perception of 'goyishness' and 'Jewishness' while his Zen is not quite Zen.

For example, talking to Alex about his obsession with a former star of silent films (Kitty Alexander), Honey, an American celebrity in her own right (albeit of a 'lesser kind'), says: *No, no, no – biggest fan – that's what I heard. An' I must say I was surprised. You don't seem like a fan of anything to me. I thought you were totally Zen – you know, rising above it all* (Smith 2003:254). Although it is apparent that Alex is on a journey to self-discovery of sorts, which could be paralleled to Zen philosophy, and for which reason *The Sunday Telegraph*, quoted on the back cover of the Penguin paperback edition, classifies *The Autograph Man* as a *deeply felt rite of passage novel*, Alex's personality traits which make him excitable and inquisitive do not seem remediable. It could hardly be argued that at the end of the novel Alex-Li reaches a Zen-like peace either with himself or with the world, which would wing him through life ever after. Before the closing scene, in which Alex performs Kaddish, a religious ceremony to commemorate the anniversary of his father's death, he insists that 'there is no other good but *feeling good*,' and reaches for Adam's 'weed box.' And even having been stopped by his friend in order that they can be 'fully present,' he nonetheless seems preoccupied with the meaning of every simple gesture that any of the gathered makes during the ceremony. He is registering people sniffing, yawning, Esther twisting the seams of her skirt, Adam giving him a discreet thumbs-up, his mother crying, somebody holding her belly with both hands, and he wonders *what this meant*. It transpires that Alex's Zen, or the process of his self-realization might never end and he seems far from being able to *rise above it all*. Alex's unique predicament requires of him that he re-models all the life strategies of which he is aware.

Similarly, the Kabbalah of Alex-Li Tandem, who was raised in Judaism by his Jewish mother Sarah and his late Chinese father Li-Jin, was not a textbook version (if we can, at all, talk about a 'textbook Kabbalah'). Alex's take on it resulted in the many mysteries in which he would dabble but never solve. One of

them was revealed in a book Alex was writing as his pastime, entitled *Jewishness and Goyishness*, where he so laboriously divided all things into Jewish and goyish. His great heresy, which his girlfriend Esther found *utterly offensive* and which made his friends Rubinfine, Adam and Joseph ‘worry for his sanity, was not being written for ‘everyone’; what is more, it was being written for ‘no one.’ *But didn’t everyone get everything? [...] Everything on earth is tailored for this everyone. Everyone gets all TV programmes, as near as dammit all of the cinema and about 80 per cent of all music. [...] Who was left to make stuff for no one? Just Alex. Only he* (Smith 2003:90–1).

Given Alex’s non-conformist ways and the nature of his quests, to say that Zadie Smith’s character is an anti-hero or an individualist with his own eccentric ways would be an understatement – as would be the thesis that Alex developed complex approaches to film; mass culture; reality as well as to religion and traditions. To infer that he situated himself on the margins or became an American-style dropout would, once again, miss the mark altogether because even if all of the above might be partly true, they fall short of the task of explaining Alex’s predicament. What we witness in the novel is the making of his life strategies, the testing of his identities, and novel ways of putting himself together, of reconciling all the various strands in him because, as he did with the world, Alex ‘itemized himself’ as well, albeit in a very different way that many second generation characters did:

*No love, no transportation, no ambitions, no faith, no community, no expectations of forgiveness or reward, one bag, one thermos, one acid hangover, one alcohol hangover, one Kitty Alexander autograph, in pristine condition, written in dark ink, centrally placed on a postcard. Look at this. If this is a man. Look at him. Never have I been more perfectly Jewish. I have embraced a perfect contradiction, like Job. I have nothing and, at the same time, everything.* (Smith 2003:119)

Terentowicz-Fotyga relates that critics tend to read *The Autograph Man* as a *symptom of postmodern exhaustion, an instance of shallow mimicry, empty pastiche* (2008:69). Alex’s outsiderism is indeed enhanced by his problematic relation to reality in which the real and the imaginary, especially the cinematographic, are intertwined so much so that the reality of films often seems to precede *the real*. In a way, however, the cinematographic *really* does frequently precede Alex’s reality because cinematography *is* part of Alex’s ‘cultural heritage’ which he had chosen for himself instead of choosing one of the traditions from the melting pot of Jewish traditions in Mount Joy, where he lives, or any other traditions present in the capital. Therefore, the image of Kitty Alexander was an equally viable ‘item’ of himself as his hangover, no faith and no community or the *perfect contradiction of being Jewish*; the latter being often understood in the West as a metaphor for universal alienation (Smith 2003:59). In his quest or in his hung-over broodings Alex does not ask then

which culture he belongs to, not quite belonging to the Jewish community seems enough as it amplifies his alienation as if doubly. Neither does Alex question 'authenticity' like others such as Mira in Srivastava's *Looking for Maya* (1999) or Sami in Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008), because, for one, he clearly expresses his ties with North London (which I analysed elsewhere) and, secondly, because as Terentowicz-Fotyga writes *the fluid, slippery, hybrid identity is the norm, as is the migratory character of the city* (2008:58).

Ethnicity and religion, with which so many characters in contemporary literature of the multiethnic British capital have to wrestle, do have an interesting place in the novel because, although they are acknowledged and they serve as resources from which one can draw on in conscious acts of self-fashioning, they are not central to the quests of the main character – they are like an earlier mentioned *extra shoe – whoa!* (Smith 2003:31) Alex was adamant that this split of things of the world into Jewish and goyish had nothing to do with *all possible psychological, physiological and neurological hypotheses (including the mixed race people see things double theory, and the fatherless children seek out restored symmetry, and especially the Chinese brains are hardwired for ying and yang dualistic thought)*' (Smith 2003:88). If Alex's identity is hybrid, like the identity of his surroundings, this hybridity does not presuppose the reliability of not only racial but even cultural theories, which he vehemently rejects. Even if talking about the impact of cultural diversity of his environment would be much more feasible, what has to be recognized simultaneously is the fact that cultural determinism cannot explain all contemporary worldviews, lifestyles and beliefs either inasmuch as a central question for Alex is a question of his own choice. And the choices that we face today are dramatically greater than any physical surroundings can expose one to. Living in a cosmopolitan metropolis such as London will still not explain (alone) all the strands and influences that we find in ourselves or around us, let alone the fact that one can live in the 'biggest melting pot' and continue to live the way one had got used to in a small village prior to arrival on the scene. Living in a metropolis does not warrant that the doors of perception be opened and that the mind is expanded as not everyone in the city is psychologically complex and culturally diverse. There are closed and tribal communities and individuals too, to which the sympathisers of the British National Party attest as do honorary killings and sacrificial murder. Likewise, just as mixed race parentage does not guarantee a certain cultural 'richness' of personality, life in a remote and ethnically homogeneous village does not preclude one from developing culturally diversified interests and personality traits or even a hybrid identity. Easy access to information and the exposure to new media have certainly decreased the importance of physical surroundings because many cultural models spread around the world regardless of the physical distance; but there is also travel, tourism, grants to study abroad and temporary migration – all of which contribute to the fact that we face an increasing number

of choices in our lives as many more models of thinking and behaviour are now available on the 'global market.'

In his recent publication on *The Art of Life*, Bauman observes that *whether we know it or not and whether we relish the news or bewail it* our lives in contemporary liquid times are works of art (2008:20). Today *being an individual [...] is not itself a matter of choice but a decree of fate*, Bauman writes, adding that *identity is not given and has to be created like works of art are created because will and choice leave their imprint on the shape of life, in spite of all and any attempts to deny their presence and/or to hide their power by ascribing the causal role to the overwhelming pressure of external forces* (2008:52–4). Consequently, Alex's blend of mysticism along with his obsession with celebrities (Kitty Alexander in particular), his alternative, almost bohemian, lifestyle strangely merged with his consumerist drive to make a fortune dealing autographs could not possibly be derived from anything but his own choice and perhaps from the new predicament of his generation which attempts to 'avoid fixation and keep the options open,' as Bauman has it in the quotation from which we started this discussion. Fixated on his own financial stability, which does keep some options open as a lot of Alex's contemporaries would say, and on his almost mystic relation to the icon of his cinematographic dreams, Alex tends to neglect the 'reality' of his family, his lover and his friends because his primary responsibility is for himself. *As Max Frisch noted*, Bauman writes, *the art of being yourself, [...] consists in resolutely rejecting and repelling definitions and 'identities' imposed or insinuated by others* (2008:81). What's more, the fact that the models passed down to Alex do not suffice to make one think of the 'postmodern crisis' or a 'postmodern crisis of identity' even because Alex indeed did not really have one model he could comfortably follow. The memory of Li-Jin, his father, who was a role model for him and his friends when they were kids before he prematurely died, was supplemented with films, youthful experiments and negative examples of Joseph's and Rubinfine's authoritative fathers. While Rubinfine and Joseph yielded under pressure, chose rabbi-hood and insurance agency respectively, Alex opted to continue to discover new territories, however transient, insecure and uncertain. Nevertheless, the term 'postmodern crisis,' if applied to Alex, seems to disappoint and explain precious little primarily because Alex's generation cannot compare their own circumstances with the idea of a 'modern certainty' that they can only know from history books perhaps; therefore, viewing their predicament as a crisis does not seem useful at all. Quite contrarily then, Alex's own, even if 'heretic,' interpretations of religions as well as his own already always uncertain choices of identifications and actions could sooner be explained by the fact that, as Bauman writes, in our liquid times we all have to be 'artists of life' and, furthermore, by the fact that unlike our predecessors who envisioned art as *something of lasting value, imperishable, resistant to the flow of time*, 'the younger generation [...] would seek the skills and patterns to imitate the practices of currently celebrated artists – the



'happenings' and 'installations' (2008:54–5), not to mention the much acclaimed unmade bed.

## A Vagabond

Like other present-day London-based protagonists, some characters in Zadie Smith's second novel experiment with their identities, trying to 'find themselves.' Alex's best friend and his girlfriend's brother, Adam, is perhaps the best example; from a Harlem Black Jewish background,

*[...] he lurched from one ill-fitting 'identity' to another every summer; going through hippiedom, grunge, gangsta-lite, various rootsisms (Ebonics, Repatriation, Rastafarianism), Anglo-phia, Americanization, afros, straightened, corn-rowed, shaved, baggy jeans, tight jeans, white girls, black girls, Jew girls, Goy girls, conservatism, Conservatism, socialism, anarchism, partying, drugging, hermiting, schizing, rehabbing – how did he get from there to this? How did he get so happy?* (Smith 2003:129)

Alex wondered; whereas Terentowicz-Fotyga comments that such '*endlessly performative self*' is defined through the multiplicity of subject positions it adopts (2008:59).<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, Adam would be an exemplar of the new predicaments and new paradigms in London literature, portraying a very flexible attitude to self, evidencing a very adaptable approach to life; however, the writer does not give the reader the chance to trace Adam's transformations as she concentrates on Alex, whose itinerary is, from what we know, more *vagrant*, although in a different way to Adam's, because it is more out of control, on the loose, unpredictable, with no set destination, wayward and erratic. While Adam seems to try to 'fit in' his new identities, Alex appears sceptical altogether – he is the unsettled one among the settled, even if the settled ones settle only for a short while. Even Alex's ideas are vagabond and he realizes he couldn't even trust his insights; not that he thought that he could trust himself. Right after his revelation of being 'perfectly Jewish,' for instance, he marvels at the possibility of blindness dwelling in his insight.

*Alex believed in that God chip in the brain, something created to process and trigger wonderment. It allows you to see beauty, to uncover beauty in the world. But it's not so well designed. It's a chip that has its problems. Sometimes it confuses a small man with a bad moustache and a uniform for an image of the infinite; sometimes an almond-eyed girl on a big screen for the stained-glass window in a church.* (Smith 2003:119)

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<sup>2</sup> Terentowicz-Fotyga makes reference to Stuart Hall, who coined the term.

Although Alex does not really observe religious rules or customs as such, the reader can easily detect a spiritual strand in him. Unlike Adam, however, he does not seem to be taking his spiritual insights very seriously. While Adam is guided and enlightened by his religious quests ('*God is a verb. That's great, isn't it?*') (Smith 2003:340), which include studying the Kabbalah and religious debates with friends and rabbis, Alex's spiritual sensitivities are more atheist in nature. They are not given enough time to ossify into 'gospels' or theories. His attention is drawn in many directions at the same time, of which his 'revelations' are only one. Alex's truths do not declare themselves as truths for everybody and for all time; conversely, they mock themselves like modernist art. His spirituality is of a postmodern kind and could be characterised by what Bauman calls 're-enchantment of the world,' whereby reason ceases to be the only guide, the world becomes re-animated, not given form solely by human design, and shows itself full of mysterious meanings and magic (2000:188–192). However, Alex's wonderment as well as his insights do not seem to anticipate a solution or an explanation in the form of religious certainties or otherwise because, like Alex himself, they remain free-roaming vagabonds – masterless, unreliable, unsettled and always in search of the new. This is why, like a vagabond Alex-Li Tandem '*decides where to turn when he comes to the crossroads,*'<sup>3</sup> which (often quite rightly) upsets people around him, in particular his girlfriend Esther, but which at the same time is symptomatic of our liquid times.

Zygmunt Bauman writes:

*The settled were many, the vagabonds few. Postmodernity reversed the ratio. Now there are few 'settled' places left. The 'forever settled' residents wake up to find the places (places in the land, places in society and places in life), to which they 'belong', non-existing or no more accommodating; streets neat today turn mean tomorrow, factories vanish together with jobs, skills find buyers no more, knowledge turns into ignorance, professional experience becomes liability, secure networks of relations fall apart and foul the place with putrid waste. [...] The world is retailoring itself to the measure of the vagabond. (1995:95)*

Consequently, we could view Alex as not only as if doubly alienated living on the fringes of his Jewish community of Mount Joy, where he grew up, but also as if doubly mobile because he is the unsettled one amongst the modern day vagabonds.

## Film and Urban Hyperreal

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<sup>3</sup> Compare Zygmunt Bauman's description of the vagabond in, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*, 1995, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 94



The ‘chip in the brain’ that Alex received from God allowed him to behold beauty and magic primarily in film; and, in the ‘almond-eyed’ Italian American actress Kitty Alexander, of course. The real and the cinematographic become two sides of the same coin; Alex looks at the world as if what he saw was part of a film but he is certainly not the only one who does that. Having landed in New York City, Alex with his fellow autograph dealers get in a cab when Ian observes that he feels *like he had been there before*. Everything was *familiar, like from another life or something*. In reply, Alex enumerates titles of famous films set in the city:

*Taxi Driver, Manhattan, Last Exit to Brooklyn, On the Waterfront, Mean Streets, Miracle on the 34<sup>th</sup> Street, West Side Story, On the Town, Serpico, The Sunshine Boys, Sophie’s Choice – ‘All About Eve,’ cut in the driver, ‘King Kong, Wall Street, Moonstruck, The Producers, Plaza Suit, The Out of Towners original and remake, The Godfather parts one and two, Kramer vs. Kramer and freakin’ Ghostbusters. We can do this all morning, my friend. The meter’s running.’ ‘Everyone’s been here before, Dove,’ said Alex, opening the cab door.’* (Smith 2003:226).

While the reader can make their own list: *Friends, Sex and the City, NYPD Blue, Kojak, Woody Allen and Spike Lee*, the point is that indeed *we have all been to New York City before*, as Alex observes. Terentowicz-Fotyga writes that in a ‘cinematographic city’ or ‘the city of simulation’ *the differences between the real and the imaginary, true and false, the original and the copy, become effaced. What we experience and what we know from films, television, and commercials cannot be told apart* (2008:61).

It appears that nowadays we all compare our reality to that of film and television and Alex is not unique in this respect and neither is his generation. *You watch too many films is one of the great modern sentences* writes Zadie Smith and adds that *of few people has it been more true than Alex-Li Tandem* (2003:391). He sees his life *vis-à-vis* the big screen and although the numerous comparisons and cinematographic flashbacks in the novel are not as plentiful as in once popular sitcom *Dream On*, Zadie Smith amuses the reader with the many observations on Alex’s or generally contemporary (cinematic) epistemology. Already as a child, for example, Alex described Adam, who had just arrived with his sister and his grandfather from Harlem *dressed like Ethiopian kings, as a boy from the films* (Smith 2003:11). Then, when Alex started going out with Adam’s sister Esther, what appealed to him was her ‘look-alike of this or that actress’ quality. *He wanted to meet her for the first time, over and over. He wanted to always be at the beginning of the movie* (Smith 2003:100). And when they argue over Alex’s involvement with another woman (Boot), Esther retorts, *and please, don’t use the phrase innocent explanation. Or, she’s just a friend. Don’t tell me you’d never do anything to hurt me. Please. Please try not to say anything you’ve heard on television* (Smith 2003:350). While, on another occasion, after

an earlier fight with his girl friend, Alex, shattered, thinks: *But you don't get no rewind in this life, as the black grandmothers in the movies like to say. Instead he pressed play. And God help him, God pass on judgement, but as the opening credits rose up, so did something inside him* (Smith 2003:161). Subsequently, Alex is soothed by the appearance of Kitty Alexander as a Peking girl alone in New York with no friends and he wonders whether women can also switch from real people (Esther, for him) to fantasy people (Kitty, Anita, Boot, porn girls, shop girls, girl girls).

To talk about the staggering impact of film and media on our lives becomes a truism; detailed studies on the subject have been and are being conducted, skilfully decoding the impression left by the daily dose of images and messages. *The images, signs, and codes of film are the matrix of the characters' experience of reality*, writes Terentowicz-Fotyga, adding that

*[...] as the faked world becomes the template for reality, simulation replaces the sense of 'the Real.' The characters become immersed in the Hyperreal world of self-referential signs – whatever happens has already happened in cinema, every creation is a recreation, every phrase a quotation* (2008:62).

This would of course seem to confirm Jean Baudrillard's contention of present-day reality being like a precession of simulacra (1994); the reality of Alex-Li Tandem being 'hyperreal' – neither real nor unreal. What is more, such liquidity between the reality of films and the reality of Zadie Smith's characters once again appears to accentuate the nature of contemporary choices as, for one, not restricted by the immediate surroundings and, secondly, as never quite final because like the actors on the screen we can envisage ourselves playing different roles with different people in different places at the same time. As a result, as in films, our lives can be envisaged as a constellation of self-sufficient episodes, which is why, fearing permanent commitments the contemporary character will often choose to keep their options open because one day we might still come across a more suitable, bigger, better part.

## **A Postmodern Man**

Like Bauman's postmodern man, Alex is experiencing an *exhilarating freedom to pursue anything and the mind-boggling uncertainty as to what is worth pursuing and in the name of what [he] should pursue it* (2000:188). Things *happen* to him. He does not seem to have a plan – certainly not a life-long one; he can plan his work, his trip to meet Kitty Alexander in New York City; he can scheme to get the best possible deal when selling the collection of her memorabilia for her benefit, but he cannot accept one strategy to accomplish a life-long objective. No idea or task today can give one a guarantee that it would

be worth living one's life like a pilgrimage to achieve. Therefore, faced with new developments, Alex improvises a lot like an actor who has not been given the script but who can 'sense' what is to come, which is why the overriding feeling of wonderment seldom abandons him. If we were to formulate his gospel for him it would possibly be fairly rudimentary and short. Reality precedes judgment, (although film reality seems to precede reality itself), while the mode of being precedes the mode of knowing. Alex can project the proper potential of the fundamental situation of *being in the world* and recognize the vulnerability of his (or anyone's) judgment, for which reason no choices can be made once and for all. His ability to decide (or commit himself) is therefore hindered by this bracing freedom of being in the world inasmuch as settling on one thing would often disqualify another. Unless it is all acting; unless it is like in a film, where actors are given a choice of not settling for one role but can freely live and shed one life after another. Not to mention editing, rewinding, pausing, cutting and pasting, credits, glamour and the glint in the eye, although the editing bit touches upon contemporary self-fashioning through ever more effective narrative skills. One has to be a professional these days, whatever one does.

## A Player

Although he needs others, Alex has to fight them off too because he is the vagabond, the stroller, the tourist and the player, all in one. He had already had to choose once to willingly accept the fact that he should narrow his options further down:

*He had long ago confronted that very stark choice, so beloved by his generation:*

*1. Be a starving, but happy, artist.*

*2. Be an affluent, but depressed, professional.*

*Alex had chosen the less travelled, third path of ignored genius.' (Smith 2003:155)*

The world demanded that he ignore his genius and be the autograph man, so Alex decided that he can play that role for the world. And even if he sees the move as a closing down of options, being an autograph man is still a play: *For I am an autograph man. No choice, then, simply this: a closing down of options. This is a simpler game than chess* (Smith 2003:119). Although there are not many things Alex can be sure of, it is often required of him that he make a choice, which is why his 'third path' seems like the best of both worlds, the more so that *somewhere in Alex's head he is the greatest, most famous person you never heard of*, anyway (Smith 2003:180).

There is a distinctive sense in which Alex is not taking the present time and place or the present form of himself very seriously, which is accentuated by his carelessly tentative choices. As if he smelled of other places, as Bauman writes

of the vagabond (1995:95). And despite the fact that there is a lot of history in his present, like the Zen and the Kabbalah, family history spanning at least two continents, film history and his personal history, he smells of the places of the future because Alex is on the move in every sense of the phrase. He has not made it yet, he has not ‘sorted himself out’ yet, and until the three quarter mark of the novel he had not met Kitty Alexander; while meeting her, at last, takes him for another spin. But apart from his ‘mission’ to help Kitty Alexander out of her misery, he does not seem to be much of a pilgrim with an aim – no waiting salvation, no Mecca, no Zen in sight, his ‘wanderings’ are no rite of passage (Where is he passing to?). Life as pilgrimage does not seem to be his strategy, even if it could hardly be argued that he travels light. Often tormented by his choices and his inability to fulfil all the requirements of the roles he is already playing, Alex is consoling himself thinking that it is all only a game – neither real nor unreal – simultaneously wishing that he could press rewind or at least pause.

Alex’s occasional naivety and drunken stupor look escapist, as in chapter nine of the second book, which begins with: *Men who don’t want to go home, go to a bar* (Smith 2003:375), when Alex does not want to confront his problems with Esther, his father’s death anniversary, the repercussions of his affair with Boot and last but not least he does not want to face the real Kitty Alexander, whom he now lied to. Notwithstanding his own moral dilemmas, the fear of facing his close ones and therefore the judgment of his peers, Alex decides to play it by ear even when the stakes are high, because it is his game after all. Even if Alex is not always playing his cards right, he is always ready to accept his possible losses just as his wins. Such is the nature of the player (Bauman 1995:82–9) and a true urbanite.

### **Moral Uncertainty and the Generational Wisdom of Keeping the Options Open**

*For a moment everyone in the bar was reminded, compelled to remember, the work undone. Documents unfinished. Letters half written. That game of suspended solitaire which sits at home, waiting for Alex-Li and his entire generation to return and finish it (and lose).* (Smith 2001:149)

When ‘moving on’ from one game to the next, Alex’s generation accepts that there will necessarily be things left undone, games unfinished or lost, books unread and unresolved problems which will come back to haunt one only some times because they had been sacrificed for the sake of ‘getting on with one’s life.’ This ability to ‘move on’ and never look back (or look back only some times) appears to be the key to the urbanite life. Why waste time and spend it battling with old demons? Anyone will tell you that you have to *move on* and *get*

*on with your life.* Unfinished business does not have to be finished; if you decide to finish it nonetheless you ought to realize that you might lose on the opportunity of doing something new and therefore more fun. Starting over has indeed become a compulsion in our liquid modern times when you can *shed the old skin, spots, warts and all, and buy a new one, ready-made and ready-to-wear* (Bauman 2008:14). Leaving things unfinished and undone is not supposed to be problematic in a society of shoppers because we should always look forward to the next purchase transforming our lives, but the fact that Alex gains his insight in a bar ‘where men go to escape things’ puts him in a different light again because having his moral dilemmas and an acute sense of not being fair to anybody, Alex does not move onto the next life but only delays facing the consequences of his actions, as if he needed to intoxicate himself to confront the ‘putrid waste’ of his relationships with family and friends.

We have become used to the fact that not many would want to dwell in such decay of past mistakes and failed relationships since we are encouraged to seek salvation in starting over with a clean slate. It is one of the predicaments of the liquid modern life that like actors in our favourite films we want to live many different and always new lives – new roles to be played every few years or months; new, often contradictory, tasks. How can one resign oneself just to one life? This does not look sane from the perspective of the urbanite as there is a new ‘me’ to be found round every corner, which may be inspired even by how the city had designed itself without a master plan. Urban planning in Great London Assembly or by local authorities can only try to tame the city space but the city still lives its own life of thousands possibilities that are born on the spur of the moment and out of pure chance. Given a choice and an open mind who will resign themselves to themselves? To their surroundings, upbringing, background, problems, to the litany of their being. Simultaneously, this will to experience oneself in diverse circumstances does not have to be understood as negating ‘where one came from’ (although it sometimes does), insofar as we do not have to reject the ‘roots’ not to feel tied to them like peasantry were tied to land in feudal times. Accordingly, even if the modern liquid self was not to constantly recreate itself it would still be advised to at least take a break from itself sometimes. Hence, tasting different lifestyles, dabbling in consumerism simultaneously with assorted religions or generally freeing oneself from the confines of ‘one self’ ceased to be seen as the domain of the schizophrenic, the inconsistent and the sell-outs. Contemporary self like Kureishi’s Shahid is much more likely to exclaim: *How could anyone confine themselves to one system or creed? Why should they feel they had to? There was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world* (1995:274). Whether we choose to interpret Shahid’s identity politics as existential, postmodern or both, his is a life strategy that is not fixed and stabilised by *one system or creed*. His openness to the *innumerable ways of*

*being in the world* will then have to be existential and experiential. Likewise, any belonging, institutional or not, will be viewed in such a reading of the self as open to interpretation and subject to change, enhancing the performative character of present-day identities – as if contemporary liquid self would like to utter the biblical *I am that I am*.

Similarly, Alex's life strategies are to preserve his autonomy; the metaphor of his Zen and his Kabbalah can capture the rift or the manifold 'and-s' in his plural sense of self but it cannot exhaust or frame all of his ways of being in the world. The rite of passage, of which *The Sunday Telegraph* writes, or his 'identity crisis' that some could detect seem to be 'permanent fixtures' of his life lived at the crossroads to the full realization of the potential of his self; however, such crossroads can also suggest living with doubt because Alex's uncertainty does have an ethical dimension contrary to what we might expect from a player and a vagabond. In all his individualistic adventures Alex lives with a consciousness of others in the world, whom he might have 'wronged' like Esther or Kitty but with whom he also wants to reconcile. His awkwardness with Esther is perhaps nowhere near taking Levinasian stance of 'responsibility for the other' but Alex's actions to rescue Kitty Alexander from her predicament are certainly asymmetrical in nature inasmuch as he shows a disinterested concern for the elderly lady and is ready to put her interests above his own. In this way, the reader can see another side of Smith's protagonist who is able to lose himself in 'being for' the other as well.

If we look at Alex from this perspective, even his crippling uncertainty will reveal itself in a different light because as Bauman comments *uncertainty is the home ground of the moral person and the only soil in which morality can sprout and flourish* (2008:107). What follows is possibly a question of why Alex and his contemporaries keep their options open – is it only because there might be something grander and better awaiting us round the corner or can it also be that some are deliberating their choices in order that they can make a (morally) *right* decision? In much of literature interpreting present-day predicaments a certain moral crisis is detected because social pluralism effects 'anything goes' approaches to life; however, I am much more inclined to agree with Bauman that authoritative commands do not make our choices more ethical and coercion 'not to do wrong' cannot be viewed as an ethical act.

*We are not compelled to take a moral stance by a superior power, which in practical terms 'means that however humans may resent being left alone to their own counsel and own responsibility, it is precisely that loneliness that contains a hope of a morally impregnated togetherness' because 'without bracing oneself for the possibility of wrong choices, one is unlikely to persevere in the search for the right choice'* (2008:107).

In spite of its contradictions the currently standard life strategy of keeping one's options open does not have to preclude ethical choices, which are just as



likely to be made in our liquid modern times as ever before. The fact that the responsibility to make the right choice falls exclusively on one's own shoulders only highlights the present-day predicament of being 'spoilt for choice' insofar as self-fashioning could never be so total and complete as it is now in our liquid metropolitan cities, where options seem endless and always at hand. What is more, as a consequence of the ingrained uncertainty of one's actions or of the question how to present oneself to the world, characters in recent London fiction are not infrequently 'caught' and portrayed by London writers in the moment of making their most critical choices because not having suitable models from the past to follow and not being satisfied with the ready-made solutions available on the market they, like Alex-Li, are left to their own devices, learning what to do and how to present themselves to the world in an existential and experiential way. Like Alex, they also make mistakes and then retract, move on or move back, or altogether keep on moving keeping their options open as long as they can because, whether we like it or not, we are all now required to be artists of life and it takes time to learn the trade.

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