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Deciphering the Location: Existential Challenges in a Multicultural Society in Zadie Smith's *NW*

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Abstract

The Anglo- Jamaican writer Zadie Smith's novel NW explores the complexities of existential challenges in the multicultural locality of North West London. The postal code NW stands for more than just a geographical area. It embodies the complexities of urban life, cultural diversity, identity, authenticity, and socio-economic disparity in NW. The four main characters of the novel, Leah Hanwell, Felix Cooper, Natalie Blake, and Nathan Bogle, come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. These characters have aspirations and ambitions beyond the limitations of their socio-economic backgrounds. Through the interconnected lives of these characters in this locality, Zadie Smith attempts to decode class dynamics and disparities in NW.

Keywords: Location, cultural diversity, Socio-economic disparity, identity, authenticity, Urban life

Introduction

> . . . It is in the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, [that] the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living and is most acutely experienced. (Bhabha 170)

Zadie Smith is a British author and an essayist known for her novels on multiculturalism, contemporary culture, and society. Smith was born in London on

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October 25, 1975, to a Jamaican mother and an English father. She studied English literature at the University of Cambridge. Her experiences as an immigrant child have often influenced her writing. *White Teeth* (2000) is her debut novel, which won several awards and established her as a prominent literary figure.

Zadie Smith's White Teeth (2000) self-consciously foregrounds its structure, shape, and organisation to channel modernist legacies of the encyclopaedic novel. But Smith also reacts against postmodernism's extension of this experimental framework—an extension which in the second half of the twentieth century was bolstered by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the 'rhizome'. Resisting the threats of stasis and unfeeling that come with this development, Smith's work engages with post-postmodern affect and sincerity, which, in the case of White Teeth, facilitates a vital discussion of race (Kowalik 1).

The novel explores themes of multiculturalism, identity, and generational differences in a diverse London neighbourhood. *The Autograph Man*, published in 2002, is her second novel. It follows a Jewish-Chinese Londoner named Alex-Li Tandem, who is obsessed with celebrities' autographs and buys and sells them for a living. *On Beauty* (2005) is Zadie's third novel, which Zadie says is influenced by E.M. Forster's novel *Howards End,* which explores themes of aesthetics, academia, and family dynamics. *NW* is set in 2012 and takes its title from the NW postcode area in North-West London, where the novel is set. *Swing Time* (2016) explores race, class, and friendship, primarily set in London and West Africa. Zadie Smith has received numerous awards and honours for her contributions to literature, including the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Whitbread Book Awards, and being named one of Granta's Best Young British Novelists. Smith's works explore themes related to identity, race, multiculturalism, and the complexities of human relationships. Her writing often reflects the cultural diversity of contemporary urban life.

Aim and Objectives

This study examines Zadie Smith's *NW* as a representation of multicultural North-West London and analyses how the novel portrays the complex relationship between identity, race, class, culture, and socio-economic inequality. Today, rapid urban change, digital technologies, climate crises, migration, and cultural diversity are reshaping how public realms are designed, governed, and experienced, while also raising questions of inclusion, resilience, and justice" (Aelbrecht and Sezer 554). This article focuses on Zadie Smith's novel *NW,* examining the title NW as both a postal code and a symbol of a microcosm of life in the multicultural neighbourhood of Northwest London. The novel delves into the challenges and nuances of survival, identity, and relationships within this diverse community. It reflects how individuals navigate life amid different cultures, social and economic disparities, and personal histories in a multicultural locale called Northwest London.

The study explores how the four principal characters: Leah Hanwell, Natalie Blake, Felix Cooper, and Nathan Bogle, negotiate their identities and struggle for survival and social recognition within a culturally diverse and economically divided

society. It also examines the significance of the postal code "NW" as a symbolic representation of the opportunities, conflicts, inequalities, and demands of multicultural urban life, while analysing how Smith's characters experience alienation, discrimination, social mobility, and the persistent search for authenticity and belonging.

Discussion

NW tells the story of four residents of Willesden, Northwest London: Leah Hanwell, Natalie Blake, Felix Cooper, and Nathan Bogle. Divided into five sections entitled "Visitation," "Guest," "Host," "Crossing," and "Visitation". Each section has a different narrator and prose style, though the novel occasionally interjects a third-person voice throughout. The second section, "Guest," follows one day in the life of Felix Cooper, another long-time resident of Willesden, and is narrated in the third person, chronologically. Felix, depicted as one of the novel's admirable characters, has more self-awareness and social sensibility than either female character, yet his story ultimately ends in his murder, resulting from one of his acts of kindness. Leah and Natalie are friends from childhood, yet their paths diverge because of the demands of a multicultural yet racially divided society. Leah is from an Irish immigrant family, remains in the council estates called Caldwell where she was born, and becomes a social worker, while Natalie, of Jamaican descent and also a resident of Caldwell in her childhood, earns her way into a prestigious college, marries into a wealthy family, and becomes a successful barrister. However, Smith shows both women's dissatisfaction and inability to form meaningful relationships or understand their own identities, which result from the opposing cultural forces of multiculturalism.

Zadie presents *NW* as being in a state of dynamic flux. The novel's setting, North West London, allows for cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity. It is an asylum for multicultural and multinational immigrants. The scenario of North West London is presented as:

> Sweet stink of the hookah, couscous, kebab, exhaust fumes of a bus deadlock. 98,16,32, standing room only -quicker to walk! Escapes from St. Mary's Paddington: expectant father smoking, old lady wheeling herself in a wheelchair smoking, die-hard holding urine sack, blood sack, smoking. Everybody loves fags. Everybody, polish paper, Turkish paper, Arabic, Irish, French, Russian, Spanish, *News of the World. . .* A hundred and one way to take cover: the complete black rent, the financial grid, back of the head, Louis Vuitton-stamped, Gucci-stamped, yellow lace, attached to sunglasses, hardly on at all, stripped, candy pink: paired with tracksuits. Skin-tight jeans, summer dresses, blouses, vests, Gypsy skirts, flares. . . Holla! Security lights, security lights, security gates, security walls, security trees, Tudor, Modernist, post-war, stone pineapples, stone eagles. . . The Arabs, the Israelites, the Russians, the Americans: here united by the furnished penthouse, the private clinic. (*NW* 42-43)

Zadie observes North West London as a cultural chaos where every aspect of the world is being united and accommodated, but the question is whether the "furnished penthouse" (NW40) is comfortable or not. It is both promising and challenging for its residents. The characters continuously experience tension between their identity and their existence in a diverse society. The four main characters are relentlessly dynamic as they establish identities beyond the ones they live by.

Zadie begins her novel with Leah Hanwell, who gets carried away by the phrase "I am the sole author of the dictionary which defines me" (*NW* 3). Leah represents the middle class in the Caldwell council. She is Irish by birth, and the Hanwells were able to survive decently among the multi-ethnic residents. Her mother was a "general nurse at Royal Free Hospital" (*NW* 177), and her father, Mr Collin Hanwell, worked for the council (*NW* 77). Leah and her friend Natalie, born Keisha Blake, grow up together in the Caldwell council, yet with significant and subtle disparities. Leah graduates with a degree in psychology and finds a job in an NGO. She marries Michael, a French man with Algerian roots who works as a hairdresser. Although Leah comes from a middle-class background, her current economic situation challenges her identity. The social pressure of motherhood haunts Leah. She married her husband out of social need. As part of the marriage, she has to fulfil the demand: bear children. Michael ardently desires a child. But the family's financial crisis does not allow Leah to proceed with childbearing. She secretly takes contraceptive pills. When her husband comes to know the truth, she psychologically collapses and refuses to communicate. For Leah, motherhood is not a blessing but a curse in the dynamic cosmopolitan society. For Leah, making the role of "motherhood" perfect and successful requires a well-established economic status.

Leah goes through excruciating pain at the death of their dog, Olive. Olive dies because they could not afford the cost of the treatment for it. Leah remains static, stuck viewing her life through the past, and is thus unable to escape her council estate physically or emotionally. She finds it difficult to cope with social mobility and succumbs to the victimisation of social and economic disparity.

In contrast, Natalie Blake, Leah's soulmate, is devoted to her quest for social identity and wants to be defined by her class, profession, and economic status. She believes only education will win her the social identity and acknowledgment she wants, so she pursues law. Natalie and Leah's friendship begins by accident and becomes inevitable. Keisha Blake (Natalie) saves Leah's life when they are both four years old. Pauline Hanwell, Leah's mother, has no choice but to appreciate the Jamaican girl Keisha's act. This is how their friendship begins. Nevertheless, Keisha goes through the shades of racism at Leah's house. Pauline subtly expresses the difference, and the shrewd Keisha observes it and uses the pain of discrimination as a tool to establish a decent identity of her own. Keisha carefully nurtures her wounded personality to rise up to reach the surface of equality. Zadie describes the unquenchable spirit of Keisha as:

> It was clear that Keisha Blake could not start something without finishing it. If she climbed the boundary of wall of Caldwell she was compelled to walk the entire wall, no matter the obstructions in her path (beer, cans, branches). This compulsion, applied to other fields, manifested itself as 'intelligence'. Every unknown word sent her to a dictionary - in search of something like 'completion' - and every book led to another book , a process which of course could never be completed. As might be expected, this route through life gave her no small portion of joy, and indeed it seemed at first that her capabilities were basically aligned…On the other hand. That she should receive any praise for such reflexive habits baffled the girl, for she knew herself to be fantastically stupid about many things. (*NW* 178)

As much as Keisha is appreciated, she feels her personality is still incomplete. She appropriately utilises the benefits for immigrants, especially for those who are racially discriminated against. She changes her name to Natalie, studies law, and becomes a barrister. She marries an affluent Italian-African businessman, Frank De Angeles, which elevates her social status and earns her respect. She also becomes the mother of two children. Even after meeting the norms for social acceptance, Natalie feels a kind of incompleteness within her. As a result, she secretly enrols herself in a community through which she has sex with unknown people. When her secret life is exposed, she is shattered and feels that she has lost her identity. Natalie's finds her current state as, *"What* is this? "KeishaNW@gail.com". What the fuck is this? Fiction?" They stood opposite each other in the hallway… 'Who are you?' Natalie Blake tried to free her wrist… Where the fuck she thought she was going. 'Nowhere, ' said Natalie Black (*NW* 294-295).

The lives of Leah and Natalie reveal the fact that Leah is the victim of socio-cultural and economic disparities, whereas Natalie goes through the ordeal of racial and economic discrimination. Ultimately, both have become easy targets of the inequality and bigotry that still prevail in the diverse society. Leah suffers because she is rooted to the land and culture. Her suffering increases because of her attachment to sociocultural validation. Natalie, on the other hand, breaks through the system and tries to climb the ladder in order to achieve her goal. Natalie's predicament results from her break from her roots. The burden of being black and its consequences push Natalie to erase the past and create a new one. In the process, she fails to understand that destroying her core identity is impossible. Yet multicultural London offers ample opportunities to elevate her social and economic status.

The next victim of multicultural society's demands is Felix Cooper. Felix Cooper is thirty-two years old. He is from the notorious Gravy House Project in Holloway but has moved with his family to a quiet corner of Kilburn, in search of a better life. After struggling with drug addiction for years, Felix is about to turn his life around. He cuts his connection off with people from his drug-dominated past and makes plans for his future career. His new life is shaped by his new girlfriend, Grace, whose optimism strongly influences him. In order to start a new life, Felix wants to cut off her ties

with his ex-girlfriend, Anne. Anne is an actress; she is white and independent. She, too, is a drug addict, and Felix feels being with her will not be progress in his life. Felix is the character who has clarity about the space he is living in. His father is a Jamaican and an ardent Rastafarian. Felix's mother, Jasmine, left him when he was six.

Due to the distortion in the family, as happens in every family in Willesden, Felix falls into drug addiction. Now, as a recovering addict, he rejoices in a recently established relationship. But he is killed in an unfair way that is also part of the crisis of multiculturalism. The death of Felix Cooper is yet another instance of the existing racism in a highly developed country like England.

Zadie Smith's description of the news in television about the murder of Felix reveals how much importance is given to one's social and racial identity:

> The young man named locally as Felix Cooper was thirty-two years old. He grew up in the notorious Garvey House project in Holloway, but had moved with his family to this relatively quiet corner of Kilburn, in search of a better life. Yet it was here, in Kilburn, that two youths accosted him early Saturday evening, moments from his own front door. It is not known if the victim knew. (NW 92)

Here, the reference to his residential area gets much more significance than the loss of a person. Smith asks why the news channels had to say he grew up in a poor economic class. This question from the side of the author suggests that class is more of a discriminating factor than that of his race, and it continues even after he is murdered. Phil Barnes is a left-wing neighbour of Felix's father, Lloyd, and is concerned about the issue of the economic divide in modern London. Barnes is depressed that London has sunk into economic decline. Felix Cooper is a dark-skinned man and is also subject to racism. But his belief is in vain that the world has changed drastically in the 21st century, and, like in other economy-driven societies, it is the poor class that is used more frequently to discriminate than his black skin colour. Felix Cooper is for sure a victim of existing racial and economic disparities in North West London.

The murderer of Felix is Nathan Bogle, an outcast who appears in each section and is always wearing a hoodie. This man is Leah's secret childhood crush. At school, both Leah and Natalie ran after him. He was an admirable football player and a handsome young man then. But now he has become an outsider whom people try to avoid. Leah herself admits that she avoids talking to him whenever she sees him on the street. In his encounter with Natalie in the fourth section, Nathan tells her how he is humiliated by people who knew him. Keisha's mother was also always "crossing the street" as if she had not seen him (*NW* 276). Nathan remarks, "People don't chat to me no more. Look at me like they don't know me" (*NW* 271).

Zadie makes his appearance almost invisible; he first appears at the ticket machine in the tube in part one. In Part Two, he is one of Felix's unnamed murderers, the silent one hidden by his hood; in Part Three, he meets Natalie in the street. In

each case, the homeless tramp appears only as a shadow. Again, he appears in the last section of the novel, called "Crossing", having an encounter with Natalie, both sharing the victimisation of racism. He is hiding from the police and finding refuge in the cemetery, where he mixes with the dead and the "duppies" (*NW*, 269). Before he leaves Natalie, he cries out about his non-existence in the world in the following words, "I am on the streets, Keisha. I had some bad luck. Natalie, don't tell people the truth. But I am not going to lie. You can see. Here I am. What you see is what you get" (*NW* 306). Nathan Bogle keeps advising Natalie to be on good terms with her husband, and it seems that he knows the facts about Natalie's misdeeds. Nathan can better understand how challenging it will be to earn a better life in a nation marked by inequality.

Conclusion

The characters in *NW* grapple with questions of authenticity as they try to define themselves amid their diverse, complex surroundings. They often confront issues related to identity and how they present themselves to the world. The characters' backgrounds, aspirations, and struggles all contribute to their search for authenticity, leading them to make decisions that sometimes align with societal expectations and sometimes go against them.

Zadie Smith's use of the postal code NW in her novel *NW* goes beyond its literal geographical reference and takes on symbolic and thematic significance. Throughout the novel, the code NW functions not simply as a postal code but as the various dimensions of multicultural society, its demands as well as opportunities for survival. Zadie Smith's attempt to decipher the location of NW London reveals the fact that the pursuit of identity is incessant. The postal code gains significance as characters strive to survive in the location, which shapes identity and serves as a backdrop for both success and failure.

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