

Hybridity and Oscillation: A Metamodern Perspective on Zadie Smith's *NW*

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the conceptual framework of hybridity and oscillation in Zadie Smith's novel *NW* from a metamodern perspective. Zadie Smith's novel *NW* provides a compelling exploration of hybridity and oscillation within a contemporary urban setting. This research paper analyses the novel using a metamodern perspective, which emphasizes the blending of modern and postmodern elements. By examining the characters' complex identities, the utilization of narrative styles, and the interplay of social issues, the discussion delves into the portrayal of hybridity and oscillation in *NW*. The novel serves as an exemplary literature that can provide insight and reflection on the hybrid nature of an ever-evolving world. Through an in-depth analysis, this paper has presented a nuanced understanding of the metamodern narrative employed. The character portrayals in *NW* exemplify the complexities of identity, oscillate between dual identity, and embrace hybridity.

Keywords: Hybridity; Metamodern; Modern; Oscillation; Postmodern.

Introduction

Zadie Smith is a British author, widely recognized for her remarkable works in contemporary fiction. Born on October 25, 1975, in London, Smith gained critical acclaim with her debut novel 'White Teeth' (2000) at the young age of 24. Since then, she has continued to captivate readers and critics alike with her insightful exploration of identity, multiculturalism, and the complexities of modern life. One of Smith's notable and challenging works, *NW* (2012), delves into the diverse neighbourhood of Willesden, Northwest London, where she grew up. In this novel, Smith intricately weaves together narratives of a group and of individuals navigating the complexities of race, social class, and personal aspirations, *NW*

stands out for its bold experimentation with form and structure and various narrative voices to capture a sense of urban dissonance and cultural hybridity. Some critics have offered varying interpretations of the novel's central themes, with some focusing on its exploration of social class and upward mobility and others emphasizing its nuanced portrayal of identity and belonging in multicultural society. Lynn Wells asserted that *NW* likely delves into the novels, complexities, possibly focusing on fragmentation in urban life. Philip Tew, as a scholar of contemporary literature, offers a broader perspective on Zadie Smith's literary contributions. Tew praises Smith's ability to create complex and believable characters who grapple with universal human experiences. He explores Smith's experimentation with narrative form and her willingness to push the boundaries of traditional novelistic conventions.

The narrative aims to explore 'hybridity' and 'oscillation' in the context of metamodernism and the shift from modern to metamodern theory in literature. The concept of hybridity refers to the blending of different cultures, identities, and genres, resulting in complex and multifaceted characters and narratives. In *NW* hybridity is evident in the characters' diverse backgrounds and geographical fusion of their environments. Characters like Natalie and Leah navigate multiple cultural identities, showcasing the complexity of postmodern urban life. The narrative style itself embodies hybridity through its mixture of voice, structure, and form. Oscillation refers to the movement between opposing ideas, identities, or states of being. It captures the tensions and fluid transitions that individuals experience in a modern world. The novel illustrates oscillation through the characters' interactions and their desires between different lives. For instance, Natalie oscillates between her working-class origins and her current middle-class status, signifying the pull and push between aspiration and authenticity.

The term "metamodernism" was coined by cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their 2010 article "*Notes on Metamodernism*". They argued that metamodernism represents a new phase in cultural development, characterized by a dynamic oscillation between modernist and postmodernist sensibilities. It can be seen as a response to the perceived limitations of both modernism and postmodernism. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's Essay "*Notes on Metamodernism*" provides a conceptual framework for understanding the cultural phenomenon of metamodernism. Metamodernism is a term used to describe a cultural condition that emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. It represents a shift away from the postmodernist skepticism and

irony towards a new kind of sincerity and engagement with the world. In their essay, Vermeulen and Van den Akker explore various aspects and characteristics of metamodernism. The authors also delve into different cultural domains, including art, literature, film, and popular culture, to highlight examples and manifestations of metamodernism. According to the theorists, metamodernism is not a fixed or static concept, but rather an ongoing process influenced by social, political, and technological changes. It offers a valuable perspective for understanding and analysing contemporary cultural expressions in the context of an ever-evolving world.

Metamodern literature often embraces the idea of 'constant repositioning' or pendulum-like movement between opposing ideas. It may explore the search for meaning in life. Metamodern writers often seek to involve reader more directly in the narrative. Some metamodern author are Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Franzen, David Forster Wallace, Ali Smith, Zadie Smith, and Dave Eggers. Specific works like David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Zadie Smith's *NW* have been analysed through a metamodern lens, suggesting they reflect a different philosophical perspective. Some notable examples of metamodern works includes David Forster Wallace's work *Infinite Jest*. *Infinite jest* is a sprawling, complex novel renowned for its intricate structure, footnotes, and layered narratives. The novel's metamodern aspects are Oscillation between sincerity and irony, seeking meaning amidst chaos, complexity, and ambiguity. Another example is David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* putting together six interconnected stories spanning different genres and tones and historical periods- from 19th century maritime adventures to futuristic societies. Metamodern aspects in the novel are oscillating tones, interconnectedness, and agency, balancing and contradictions. In essence, Metamodernism in literature represents a move beyond the limitations of both modernism and postmodernism, seeking a more nuanced and complex understanding of the world and our place within it.

To understand hybridity and oscillation we need to have a glimpse of the novel's storyline. The novel *NW* by Zadie Smith follows the lives of four characters, Leah Hanwell, Natalie Blake (also known as Keshia), Felix Cooper, and Nathan Bogle, who grew up in a North West London neighbourhood. The story is divided into five sections: each focuses on one character and its experience. In the first section titled 'Visitation', Leah Hanwell, a mixed-race woman with Jamaican heritage, is introduced. Leah is married to Michel and works in an office. She feels conflicted about her identity torn between her working-class roots and upward mobility. She wants to find her sense of self. Leah reconnects with an old friend, Natalie,

who is now a successful lawyer living in a wealthy part of London. They reminisce about their shared childhood in North West London and the challenges they had faced growing up.

The second section, 'Guest,' follows Felix, a former drug addict and childhood friend of Leah and Natalie. Felix is trying to build a stable life. He wants to start a new life with his girlfriend Grace. He meets one last time with his drug-using ex-lover to say goodbye to that part of his life. On his way home he is murdered during an armed robbery. The third section, 'Host,' shifts focus to Natalie, who is caught up in her struggles. Natalie Blake has achieved all her desired accomplishments throughout her life. She completed her education at a prestigious University, established a thriving legal career, entered into marriage with an affluent investment banker, and relocated to a luxurious area in London to raise their two children. However, Natalie surprisingly maintains a hidden aspect in her life using the internet to arrange secret meetings with swinger couples.

The narrative in the fourth section, 'Crossing,' shifts again to Natalie and Nathan Bogle. Nathan is a charismatic and mysterious character, as a young boy, he showed great potential as a football player. His ambition was foiled by his drug addiction. Now he earns his living by illegal activities. Natalie's spouse uncovers the online account she has been using to engage in her secret relationships and confronts her about it. Feeling overwhelmed and distressed, Natalie aimlessly roams the streets of her childhood neighbourhood throughout the night. It is during this time she encounters Nathan Bogle, someone she went to school with, who has unfortunately succumbed to drug addiction. Nathan appears to be entangled in dubious activities, Natalie reaches the brink of despair, contemplating jumping from a bridge, but Nathan intervenes, preventing her from taking such a drastic action.

The fifth section, with the same title as the first, 'Visitation,' shows all the characters facing problems. This section highlights Natalie's challenges, and her close friend Leah facing troubles in her marriage. Michel, Leah's husband, discovers that Leah has been deceiving him about her use of birth control without his knowledge. After much hesitation, Leah confesses to Michel that she does not share his desire for family. As they argue, Natalie interrupts their conversation, eager to discuss her encounter with Nathan and seek Leah's perspective. However, their discussion changes when they learn about an armed robbery, which tragically results in the death of an innocent person, Felix. This news casts a different light on recent events leading Leah and Natalie to suspect Nathan's involvement

in Felix's murder. Further Leah and Natalie mutually decide that it is necessary to inform the police.

Zadie Smith experimented with form and structure both. The narrative structure of *NW* by Zadie Smith can be viewed through the lens of meta-modernism. In the case of *NW*, one could examine how the narrative structure reflects the hybridity. Modern novels, in general, engage with storytelling techniques such as linear narratives, stream of consciousness, and sense of progress or universal truth while also subverting postmodern elements like fragmentation, multiple perspectives, and questioning of grand narrative. The novel consists of four main sections each with its unique narrative style and perspective. The sections of the novel are interconnected and jump between different characters and timelines creating a mosaic-like structure that mirrors the diverse neighbourhood of North-west London. As Lynn Wells writes in his essay 'The Right to a Secret: Zadie Smith's *NW*'

Within each section, the mode of narration is matched to the character's state of mind: Leah's deeply introspective soul is conveyed partially through a stream of consciousness reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, a key inter-text for *NW* (101)

The first section, titled 'Visitation,' follows the character of Leah Hanwell, as it is structured in a more traditional linear narrative style. It provides the foundation for the story, introducing the reader to the neighbourhood and its inhabitants. The second section, titled 'Guest,' introduces the reader to Felix Cooper and those around him stepping aside from the main narrative. The third section, titled 'Host,' shifts and adopts a stream-of-consciousness narrative style, allowing the reader to delve into the mind of the characters and Natalie Blake, a successful lawyer in London. This section focuses on Natalie's internal struggle, her past, and her complicated relationship. The section contains various forms of writing, chat, and dialogues, emphasizing the disjointed nature of Natalie's experiences and her oscillating self. The fourth section again shifts to Natalie and Nathan Bogle and reveals the disjointed nature of Nathan's experiences. Overall, Smith's use of multiple narrative styles adds depth and complexity to the story allowing readers to engage with the characters and themes from different vantage points.

In *NW* by Zadie Smith, the concept of hybridity is an important aspect that is explored through the lives of the main characters: Leah, Keisha (later known as Natalie), Felix, and Nathan Bogle. Leah Hanwell represents one

aspect of hybridity in the novel. She is a mixed-race woman who grew up in the working-class neighbourhood of North West London. Leah struggles with her identity and sense of belonging. She marries a French-Algerian immigrant Michel. When the novel starts Leah is in her thirties. She is the only white of the four characters. Leah displays the least interest in rising above her upbringing, settling for a middling education and a low-paying job in a local social agency. Unlike her African-born husband Michel, a hairdresser who tries to better their lives a lot through online trading, Leah prefers a life of indolence, smoking Dope with her neighbour and wishing to remain 'eighteen always',

To be very objective about it, it is the woman's fault that they never discussed children. For some reason, it had never occurred to her that all this wondrous screwing was heading towards a certain perfectly obvious destination. She fears the destination. Be objective! What is the fear? It has something to do with death and time and age. Simply: I am eighteen in my mind and if I do nothing if I stand still nothing will change, I will always be eighteen. For always. Time will stop. I will never die (24)

Leah was taking birth control secretly without the knowledge of her husband. She was interested in enjoying the present and afraid to lose her love: Things change! We are getting there, aren't we?

The woman does not know where it is. She did not know they had set off, nor in which direction the wind is blowing. She does not want to arrive. The truth is she had believed they would be naked in these sheets forever and nothing would come to them ever, nothing but Satisfaction. Why must love 'move forward'?" (24)

Keisha/Natalie Blake, on the other hand, represents another aspect of hybridity. She is also a mixed-race woman from North West London, but she successfully navigates her way out of the neighbourhood. She becomes a successful lawyer and adopts a more middle-class lifestyle. However, despite her outward success, Natalie feels a sense of dislocation and internal conflict. She is constantly haunted by her past and her working-class identity. Her hybridity is reflected in her struggle to balance her new life with her old self, and her attempts to reconcile her professional success with the working-class community she left behind.

Felix Cooper, the third main character, adds another layer to the exploration of hybridity in the novel. Felix is a white man who also comes from

NW London. He grapples with his sense of identity and belonging, feeling like an outsider in the neighbourhood despite having his long-standing residence there. Felix's hybridity is revealed through his relationships with the diverse range of characters in the neighbourhood and his struggle to find his place among them. He experiences a sense of otherness as he navigates the complexities of a multicultural society.

Through Leah, Keisha/Natalie, and Felix, Smith explores the complexities of hybridity and the different ways in which individuals grapple with their sense of identity and belonging in a multicultural society. The characters' experiences reflect the fluidity and complexity of identity, as they negotiate between different social, economic, and cultural worlds. Their stories highlight the challenges, conflicts, and tensions that arise when different cultures and backgrounds intersect, providing a nuanced portrayal of the hybrid nature of contemporary urban life.

In *NW* by Zadie Smith, the concept of oscillation is a recurring theme in the lives of the main characters: Leah, Keisha/Natalie, Felix, and Nathan. Leah Hanwell's life is characterized by a constant back-and-forth movement or oscillation between different social and cultural worlds. She grew up in the working-class neighbourhood of NW London but strives to distance herself from her roots to embrace a more middle-class lifestyle. However, she finds herself constantly being pulled back into the neighbourhood and her working-class identity. Leah oscillates between her desire for upward mobility and her longing for a sense of belonging to her community. This oscillation is reflected in her relationships and experiences, as she navigates between the different worlds she inhabits. Keisha, who later changes her name to Natalie Blake, experiences a similar oscillation in her life. She successfully escapes the neighbourhood and becomes a successful lawyer, adopting a more middle-class lifestyle. However, she constantly oscillates between her new life and her past, feeling a sense of dislocation and internal conflict. Natalie oscillates between her professional success and the working-class community she left behind, grappling with her dual identities and the tensions that arise from this oscillation.

Felix Cooper, a white man who lives in NW London, also experiences oscillation in his life. Despite his long-standing residence in the neighbourhood, he feels like an outsider and constantly struggles to find his place among the diverse range of characters in the community. He oscillates between his desire for connection and a sense of otherness, as he navigates the complexities of a multicultural society. Felix's oscillation is evident in his relationships and interactions with the neighbourhood's residents, as

he tries to bridge the gap between his own identity and the identities of those around him.

Nathan Bogle, another resident of NW London, also undergoes oscillation in his life. He oscillates between different roles and personas, trying to adapt and fit in with different groups. His identity is fluid, as he oscillates between being a father, a husband, a friend, and a drug addict. Nathan's oscillation reflects the fragmented nature of his life and the constant shifting of his priorities and relationships. The concept of oscillation permeates the lives of Leah, Keisha/Natalie, Felix, and Nathan in *NW*. It captures the constant movement, tension, and negotiation they experience as they try to find their sense of identity and belonging in a multicultural society. Their lives are marked by a continuous back-and-forth motion, as they navigate the complexities, contradictions, and conflicts that arise from embodying multiple identities and inhabiting different social worlds. This oscillation adds depth and complexity to their character arcs, highlighting the nuanced nature of contemporary urban life.

As the pages of *NW* unfold, Zadie Smith skilfully navigates the intricate landscape of hybridity and oscillation through the insightful lens of a Metamodern perspective. This exploration not only sheds light on the complexities of identity in a modern, multicultural society, but also challenges traditional literary norms to create a truly immersive and thought-provoking experience for the reader. Smith's masterful weaving of diverging narratives, cultural tensions, and the nuances of metamodernism invites us to reflect on the fluid nature of human existence and the interconnectedness of our contemporary world. Through this lens, Smith tells a story that prompts a deeper examination of the multifaceted layers of our shared human experience

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