
Confined in the urban zone: Postmodern city in Zadie Smith's *NW*

Ne'am Abd Elhafeez

Department of English, Faculty of Al-Sun (Languages), Minia University, Egypt

Email: nabdelhafeez@gmail.com

Abstract

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, literary representation of the city has proliferated as it becomes a central factor in constructing modern literature and postmodern literature. The contemporary city reflects postmodern reality in which “the world itself becomes both discontinuous and indeterminate” (Lehan, 1998, p. 267). In postmodern literature, the city is complicated and diverse, of diminished humanity and human isolation and anxiety. This paper aims to investigate the complex urban zone of the contemporary city as reflected in the postmodern novel *NW* (2012) by the British writer of Jamaican origin, Zadie Smith. The paper attempts to answer the following questions: Does the city as a trope in postmodern literature become an equivalent to entrapment? How is the city transformed into a system of signs that cannot be deciphered? How is the construction of subjectivity affected by the postmodern city? To answer these questions, the study will employ Richard Lehan's theorization of the postmodern city and the subject in addition to Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality as a theoretical framework. These theories will be utilized to analyze the symbolic representation of city in literature as reflected in *NW*. By integrating postmodern theory and literary analysis, this research seeks to fill the gap by focusing on the psychological weight that the postmodern city exerts on the individual. By integrating postmodern theory and literary analysis of Smith's fragmented characters, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of the complex relationship between urban spaces, their literary portrayals, and postmodern literature.

Keywords: postmodernism, contemporary city, hyperreal, Zadie Smith, *NW*

1. Introduction

Tracing the history of the city throughout the last three hundred years is a kind of tracing the history of western civilization. The idea of the city began with an optimistic vision of organizing the relationship between the individual and the land, moving through different stages of commercial, industrial city, reaching the contemporary city which Richard Lehan calls “postindustrial” (1998, p. 289) or cosmopolitan city. In his book, *Practices of Everyday Life* Michel De Certeau (1988) defines the city as “a place of transformations and appropriations, the object of various kinds of interference but also a subject that is constantly enriched by new attributes, it is simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity” (p.96).

Reading the city through literary texts is an essential part of English literature. Representations

of the city in literature date back centuries, beginning with Thomas More's imagined state in *Utopia* (1551), Daniel Defoe's optimistic depiction of urban spaces as a means of mastering nature, exemplified in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). This exploration of the city in literary texts continued into the Victorian era, which documented the urban transition and the rise of the materialistic city, as vividly portrayed in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Hard Times* (1854). With the advent of modernism in the early twentieth century, the city emerged as a symbol of alienation, characterized by spiritual desolation, as depicted in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), or as a site of oppression under totalitarian regimes, as seen in George Orwell's *1984* (1949). By the late twentieth century, under the influence of late capitalism and globalization, the literary representation of the city evolved further, emphasizing its increasing materialism and complexity. The contemporary city is a reflection of the postmodern condition in which, "the world itself becomes both discontinuous and indeterminate" (Lehan, 1998, p. 267). In postmodern literature, the city is portrayed as a diverse, entropic, and fragmented space, intensifying human isolation and anxiety. This can be traced in the novels of Thomas Pynchon, Paul Auster, and Don DeLillo, in which the city is often depicted as a mechanized entity, characterized by a diminished sense of humanity. In this sense, the city can be seen as a destructive entity that can devour its citizens through impersonal institutions. It is a site of changing reality that alternates between chaos and order, continuity of life, and fragmentation. The city is regarded as "both a physical and a metaphysical space" (Beville, 2013, p. 603). City inhabitants are part of the city's paradoxical state. Attempting to encompass the complex reality of the city, the postmodern writers represent its plural experience through tracing the journeys of their protagonists in and around the city.

Zadie Smith is a prominent British author of Jamaican ancestry, who is famous for her novels *White Teeth* (2000), *The Autograph Man* (2002), *On Beauty* (2005), *NW* (2012), *Feel Free* (2018), and *Intimations* (2020), along with her essay collections *Changing My Mind* (2009). She is known for her eccentric characterization and her exploration of the complicated realities of multicultural life with an emphasis on race and cultural identity (Britannica, 2024). Coming from immigrant ancestry, with multiple identities, she envisions the city as a site of power that seeks to control and shape the life of its inhabitants. Focusing on London, the multicultural, multiracial, cosmopolitan, and metropolitan city, the epitome of urban complexity in Western civilization, Smith launches attacks against these urban sites whose cost of modernity was paid by those who are left behind whether in slums or in slave burial grounds. She engages in the relation between the city and individual raising questions about the possibility of individuals' autonomy and freedom within the confinements of the city. Her novel *NW* (2012) which stands for Northwest of London, seeks "to render not only the cognitive disorder of postmodern experience but also the social and psychological disorders of postmodern—that is, post-welfare state—capitalism" (Marcus, 2013, p. 70).

This research seeks to fill the gap by focusing on the psychological weight that the postmodern city exerts on the individual. While much of the current literary studies examine the social and economic dimensions of urban spaces, less attention has been paid to the subjective, internalized experiences of individuals navigating the fragmented, and disconnected environments characteristic of postmodern urbanism. By exploring how the complexities of the postmodern city—characterized by its materiality, cultural clashes, and the intersection of

class, race, and gender—affect the psyche, this paper seeks to shed light upon the emotional challenges that urban dwellers face. The focus on the interplay between urban structures and personal mental states provides a profound understanding of how individuals contend with alienation, identity struggles, and a sense of disorientation within these dynamic urban landscapes.

2. Theorizing the city in Postmodern literature

In order to analyze the different discourses that define the city, De Certeau (1988) distinguishes between the city as a concept or an idea and the real city. The concept city was based on utopian and urban discourse that can be defined through three steps:

1. The production of its own space...
2. The substitution of a nowhen, or a synchronic system, for the indeterminable and stubborn resistances offered by traditions
3. Finally, the creation of a universal and anonymous subject which is the city itself: it gradually becomes possible to attribute to it, as to its political model, all the functions and predicates that were previously scattered and assigned to many different real subjects—groups, associations, or individuals. “The city,” like a proper name, thus provides a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties. (1988, p.95)

But this vision that was the foundation of the idea of the city as a way “of organizing a community in relation to the land” (Lehan, 1998, p. 285) has totally changed, the city becomes a site for contesting political, social and economic agendas, and a location for opposing power forces. Certeau realizes that the modern city is deteriorating, stating “The Concept-city is decaying. Does that mean that the illness afflicting both the rationality that founded it, and its professionals afflicts the urban populations as well? Perhaps cities are deteriorating along with the procedures that organized them” (1988, p.96).

Living in a world controlled by late capitalism, the economic system is very complex, and money controls every facet of human life, the city becomes more materialistic cutting its relation to spiritual imagination. In his book *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*, Richard Lehan (1998) explains that “the postindustrial city also takes its meaning from the complex handling of international capital and the multinational corporation” (p. 287). These materialistic changes alter the nature of the city, which becomes a center of business, education, science, and technology, but such advances come at a price that each individual pays from his true self. Lehan asserts that “the modern city established a new set of limits that marked the farthest point to which men and women could go and still remain human” (1998, p. 274).

If there is an essential relation between historical eras and the literary modes that represent them, the relation between the contemporary city and postmodern literature is visible. To analyze the city in postmodern literature, the paper focuses on Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality. Baudrillard (1988) believes that the culture is now dominated “by simulations, objects, and discourses that have no firm origin, no referent, no ground or foundation” (p.1), and he applies this theory to all facets of everyday life. In a system controlled by consumer

objects, the individual is surrounded by infinite playing of signs or floating signifiers, “which orders society while providing the individual with an illusory sense of freedom and self-determination” (1988, p.2). Contending that the cultural concepts must be analyzed by linguistic categories, Baudrillard (1988) revisits Saussure’s theory of the sign, reversing the assumption of the relation between the signifier and the signified. Originally, signs are words that are connected to their referents or signified, but now he theorizes that in the postmodern era of the late twentieth century, “signs become completely separated from their referents, resulting in a structure that resembles the signal: signifiers act like traffic lights, emitting meanings to which there is no linguistic response” (p.4). Extending his theory from the linguistic to the cultural realm, Baudrillard envisions a world based on signs that have no relation to or reference to reality; rather they are only related to themselves. He realizes that the world has become a “hyperreal” which stands for “a world of self-referential signs” (Baudrillard, 1988, p.6); it becomes a product “of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere” (Baudrillard, 1988, p.167).

Baudrillard states that all modern society has replaced reality with signs and symbols, thus human experience becomes a simulation of reality. Reality disappears with simulation, creating simulacra, which is an unreal image or representation of something. He asserts:

The real is produced from miniaturized units, matrices, memory banks, and command models - and with these, it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. Since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. (Baudrillard, 1988, p.167)

The human condition in the postmodern society is based on simulacra that have nothing to do with reality. If the image or representation starts with the idea that the sign and real are equal, simulation starts with “the radical negation of the sign as value” (Baudrillard, 1988, p.167).

In the light of Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality, the city can be seen as “a system of signs” (Lehan,1998, p. 265) that has lost signifiers, and thus loses its claim to reality. So, the city is transformed from being a physical reality into “a postmodern abstraction: ephemeral, unreal, unmappable and uncanny” (Beville, 2013, p. 603). The contemporary city can best be described in terms of chaos, disorder, instability, and human isolation.

Like other postmodernists, Baudrillard believes that the subject or individual is void, and empty. The subject as the source of independent consciousness has been doubted. The city, in its postmodern phase, creates a sense of anxiety and tension in the human subjects to fulfill their needs. They are set in an endless maze in which they are cut from everything except the constant play of “urban signifiers and cultural stimuli” (Lehan, 1998, p.5). Mark Poster comments on the empty subjectivity that the urban condition creates saying:

The concurrent spread of the hyperreal through the media and the collapse of liberal and Marxist politics as master narratives deprive the rational subject of its privileged access to truth. In an important sense individuals are no longer citizens, eager to maximize their civil rights; nor proletarians, anticipating the onset of communism. They are rather consumers, and hence the prey of objects as defined by the code. In this sense, only the “fatal strategy” of the point of view of the object provides any understanding of the present situation. (1988, p.7)

Based on the argument that the era of the presentational subject is past or history, now the subject cannot envision or control reality. Thus, the world has been controlled by the hyperreal or simulated object. It seems that individuality is lost, and the price of progress is paid by

humanity itself. Lehan (1998) asserts:

As postmodernism drains consciousness from both the subject and the urban world, the self is commodified along with other objects; what is human becomes virtually refined away, leaving us only a world of things and objects and the relation between them... Modern city, which brought the individual into being, then destroyed individualism. (p. 274)

Moreover, if the city is a system of power like those structures described in Foucault's book *Discipline and Punishment*, then it will attempt to control and shape the subjects to be part of the system. In doing so, the subject's consciousness is controlled or manipulated by power institutions. In a similar vein, de Certeau emphasizes: "The city is organized through transforming a human multiplicity into a "disciplinary" society and of managing, differentiating, classifying, and hierarchizing all deviances concerning apprenticeship, health, justice, the army, or work" (1988, p. 97). This enforcement of power in a discipline such as a city can create a conflict between the individual and the system or a "contradiction between the collective mode of administration and an individual mode of reappropriation" (de Certeau, 1988, p. 97).

Whether surrendering to the system of the city or resisting it, Zadie Smith seeks to conceptualize the nature of the contemporary postmodern city and the individual's relation to it.

3. Lost in the maze of *NW*

Reading Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality and Lehan's critique of the contemporary city shows that postmodernism has affected the nature of the city itself as a human structure and changed the relationship between the city and its inhabitants. Analyzing Zadie Smith's *NW* in the light of this concept reflects how the writer manages to portray London as a postmodern city that appears as an urban maze, and how this chaos affected its dwellers who become unable to decode its urban signifiers. Described as an urban epic, *NW* is named after the postal code of London, the Northwest part of it. *NW* is a novel about contemporary London, which seems to be turbulent, crowded, fragmentary, "relentless and remorseless" (Thomas, 2012, p. 268) city. The novel traces the life of four Londoners who grow up in an impoverished part of the city, namely the Caldwell housing project, following their life paths in the urban complexity of London.

London is presented as a metropolitan center of commerce, education, industry, and business. Although it appears as a cross-cultural center of many nationalities, races, and classes, and a meeting point for people "from Jamaica, from Ireland, from India, from China" (Smith, 2012, p. 15) who congregate together in poor districts where the smells of "sweet stink of the hookah, couscous, Kebab, exhaust fumes of a bus deadlock" (Smith, 2012, p.15) fuse together, these congregations do not add to each other. Instead, they appear in the story as faceless crowds, who strive to find a meaning for their lives but in vain. London appears in different images throughout the novel; it appears as a maze, in which subjects are lost by various possibilities multiplied in front of them that end with nothing. It can be seen as a trap from which individuals seek to get out, or it is the place where they lack freedom of choice.

Zadie Smith is aware of the cultural changes that happened to individuals in the postmodern city; in her novel, she creates flat characters that lack subjectivity and are in an endless pursuit

of finding a transcendent meaning of their life, and when they fail, they are left with the mysterious city. In *NW*, subjectivity is lost in the postmodern chaotic London. In the middle of the maze, we meet four characters, Leah, Natalie, Felix, and Nathan who try to move up the social ladder leaving NW, but they are all brought back to the same place, unable to “get out of this two-mile square of the city for long” (Thomas, 2012, p. 269). By following their paths through different locations in the city, all they just aimed for is to escape this two-mile square. The genius of the novel lies in its focus on “the psychic and material shocks of those left behind in Northwest London” (Marcus, 2013, p. 70).

Leah Henwell, the protagonist of the first section in *NW*, “Visitation”, is portrayed by Smith as a character who cannot decode the city and its urban signifiers, thus she suffers from a sense of entrapment. Introduced as one of the residents of NW, Leah is an estate girl who has studied philosophy, married to Michel, a French Algerian hairdresser, and works at a nonprofit organization, not so far from the place she grew up. Although she appears to have a stable life with a steady job and a great sense of social responsibility towards the poor, deep inside she feels an utter failure. In their article “Psychological Disposition in the Select Novels of Zadie Smith,” Kowsalya and Thenmozhi (2024) express Leah’s dilemma, describing her life as turmoil, “She is upset with Michel’s attitude towards life and family. She experiences existential crises and feels low motivation. Even though she has a strong belief in others, she is fundamentally unsure about herself” (p.784)

One of the factors that led to her dilemma is her sense of the lack of “agency and belonging” (Shaw, 2017, p. 3) to a certain world. She is presented as an in-between character, stranded among different worlds with no center. The only child to her Irish British parents, Leah is the only white girl among her colored colleagues in the office who tease her for taking one of their men and for being the only woman without a child, as she aborts herself three times. She bears the position of the outsider excluded from the sisterhood of “the women in our community,” (Smith, 2012, p. 39) as her colleagues remind her “The Afro-Caribbean community, no offense, but when we see one of our lot with someone like you it’s a real issue” (Smith, 2012, p. 39). Stigmatized for her racial difference, Leah feels isolated “with a deep feeling of unbelonging, which transfers the feelings that have been often attributed to those on the margins onto somebody allegedly in the centre” (Zapata, 2014, p. 88).

Although it is a nonprofit organization that values the concepts of charity and empathy, the work constitutes for Leah “an environment in which she constantly feels isolated and excluded on account of her non-African heritage” (Shaw, 2017, p.9). Outside work, she continually endeavors to build wider connections with her small community, yet her attempts to help a drug addict who sought her help are doomed to failure in reference to her limited agency to change the dark reality of urban life.

Her longing for interconnection is a part of her attempts to construct and reconstruct her sociocultural identity, which she realizes that this can be achieved only in a parallel universe. While on a bus,

Leah stares at a red bindi until it begins to blur [. . .] taking up all of her vision until she feels she has entered the dot, passing through it, emerging into a more gentle universe, parallel to our own, where people are fully and intimately known to each other and there is no time or death or fear. (Smith, 2012, p. 39)

Shaw (2017) comments on Leah's inability to establish wider patterns of allegiance as "reflective of the novel's melancholic stance to cultural relationality and ethical orientation, as she struggles to establish any meaningful relationships with her fellow residents and loses a sense of her own identity in the process" (p.10).

On the first page of the novel, Smith draws the world that the character lives in. She lives in a basement flat, "fenced in, on all sides" (Smith, 2012, p. 3), in a crowded street obliged to hear her neighbor's conversation and curses from the nearby balcony, which conveys a sense of claustrophobia and entrapment to the reader, arousing questions like "Is [Leah] the one who thinks of herself as "fenced in, on all sides"? Or is it Smith, alerting us to the greater problem of Leah's condition?" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 41) This sense of entrapment creates "a claustrophobic atmosphere of otherness from the outset" (Shaw, 2017, p. 6).

Throughout her life, Leah's identity is fluid, always in flux. Described by her friend Natalie as a shapeshifter, Leah's ability "for moving among worlds has stranded her somewhere permanently in between. She's the odd one out in any group" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 39). Her indeterminacy and passivity are witnessed in her use of passive voice to describe her status: "What was the purpose of preparing for a life never intended for her?" (Smith, 2012, p. 34) She wonders before a work meeting, thinking of the "fancy degree" that has turned out to be all but useless in her social services job.

Through Leah, Smith confirms that the subject is trapped in this confining urban zone of the city. She couldn't get outside NW throughout her life; she learned, worked, and married in the same poor district of London. Her sense of entrapment can be related to her low social class. When she is invited to her rich friend's Natalie party, her sense of inferiority is augmented and her feeling of controlling her destiny is negated: "Most often at Natalie's house, where she and Michel are invited to provide something like local color, they look down at their plates . . . letting Natalie tell their stories for them, nodding to confirm points of fact, names, times, places" (Smith, 2012, p. 96). In delineating Leah's character, Smith here emphasizes that "the spiritual trauma and material limits of poverty...spectral traumas of class... the sense that we are all masters of our own destinies has been baldly dismissed" (Marcus, 2013, p. 70).

In fact, Leah is a manifestation of a postmodern subject, who is void and empty, lacking a spiritual compass that can guide her outside the unreliable fragmented physical world. Her spiritual estrangement and her indeterminacy divest her from the ability to define herself, or her position in the world. When she listens to this line from the radio, she cannot get a pen to write this inspirational line: "I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me. A good line—write it out on the back of a magazine... I am the sole author" (Smith, 2012, p. 3). Unlike the heard statement on the radio, Leah is not the writer of her own life. As she cannot figure out "How to see herself as the agent of her own experience" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 39), the optimistic statement is contradicted with the fact that "pencil leaves no mark on magazine pages" (Smith, 2012, p. 3). Through Leah, Smith conveys that the individual is submerged within the limits of the city. Whether it is poverty, inequality, voicelessness, or exclusion, the postmodern subject is trapped, not able to define him/herself. Thus, *NW* is concerned with "the clear, determined aspects of inequality: those determinacies born out of where we live and what we do. We are not the sole authors of the dictionaries that define us; in fact, we are not, even

in part, the authors of who we are" (Marcus, 2013, p. 70).

It is not only Leah who is trapped in the postmodern urban London, Natalie, the second heroine of Smith's book, is also collapsed in the maze of Smith's *NW*. Unlike Leah, Natalie manages to leave the poor district of NW, but this does not diminish her sense of entrapment. Inside or outside NW, Smith reminds us that the individual is lost in the postmodern city. It is Natalie who "is the clear heroine of the book, the vessel Smith has chosen to transmit a series of acute observations about life, love, class, race, purpose, confusion, family, isolation" (Schwartz, 2012, p 44). On the surface, she appears as an example of self-achievement and success. She works as a successful barrister, marries a black banker Frank De Angelis, has two fabulous children, and lives in a marvelous house double the size of Caldwell flats. But beneath this beautiful image lies the truth. Her professional success manifested in "Private wards, Christmas abroad. Security systems. Fences. The carriage of a 4x4 that lets you sit alone above traffic" (Smith, 2012, p. 220) covers a hollow self, empty life and fake appearances that fail to find a meaning in her life.

In her essay "Two Paths for the Novel", Smith (2008) describes characters "who look into the eyes of the other and see no self at all, only an unknowable absence, an abyss". Natalie falls under this category, a character with no true self. Natalie De Angelis, who was known as Keisha Blake before changing her name to Natalie, reminds the reader of Baudrillard's hyperreal subjects that begin to lose their reality, appear to be unreal, and fake. Throughout the section entitled "Host", Smith follows Natalie's life, tracing her struggle to get outside NW. This section recounts many incidents of Natalie's life in fragmented prose "that can be read as a trope evoking the self-un-making experienced by upwardly mobile subjectivities" (Becker, 2024, p.185). During her adolescence, Keisha recognizes her friend Layla as real in the mirror, but she recognizes herself only as a forgery (Smith, 2012, p. 221). Moreover, she describes herself as having "no self to be, not with Leah, or anyone" (Smith, 2012, p. 246). After many years, when Keisha becomes the rich barrister, Natalie is described as one of "the first people in either of their families to become professionals. They thought life was a problem that could be solved by means of professionalization" (Smith, 2012, p.39). However, Smith is keen to show that this story of self-making is camouflage, an invented reality. When Natalie is invited to give a careers talk about her success story, she highlights the importance of values such as "time management, identifying goals, working hard, respecting oneself" (Smith, 2012, p. 291), yet in her enthusiastic speech she kept daydreaming about her childhood friend Leah, envying her physical relation with her husband. This section was constructed by Smith in a way that "destabilises the character's attempted reiteration of the master plot of upward mobility" (Becker, 2024, p. 185).

The more successful Natalie appears, the emptier she becomes. Attempting to fill the void in her life, she starts sexual relations with strangers that she meets online. When her husband Frank De Angelis discovers her internet profile created for these sexual encounters, in which she kept her old name and location within the working class as "Keisha NW," he shouts at her wandering: "Who are you?" Her answer reflects her dilemma, "Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag" (Smith, 2012, p. 333). After Frank's discovery, Natalie left her home with her slippers moving back

towards Caldwell in NW. In her analysis of the term “drag”, Judith Butler (1993) defines it as “a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes” (p. 125). Drag in *NW* includes gender, class, and race categories, thus “each [drag] required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes, she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic” (Smith, 2012, p. 333).

As a child of a Caribbean immigrant, belonging to the poor class, Natalie’s character is shaped by the intersection of color, ethnicity, gender, and class which adds layers of complexity. Natalie’s identity as a successful barrister is a construct that is shaped by marrying a wealthy man and ascending the social ladder. Her final encounter with her husband reveals the constructedness of her invented identity. This explains why she appears in many incidents as not a real, or selfless person that can be described as “a pastiche of identity politics and theoretical notions of the self-as-construct, this is shrewd” (Schwartz, 2012, p. 44). Being both Natalie and Keisha reflects her ambivalence, and her inability to define herself. To be “Natalie and Keisha, lawyer and hairdresser, higher and lower class, the narrative reveals that she continues to have no self to be...As the problem is that, not only Keisha but also Natalie, are fiction... Therefore, she has no self and, consequently, no origin” (Zapata, 2014, p. 93). The construction of Natalie as a selfless subject can be seen in the light of the postmodernist notion of subjectivity, or it can result from “the influence of political, patriarchal, and neocolonial discourses which silence Natalie’s origin as a working-class woman and force her to assimilate into what her new society considers to be universal and normative” (Zapata, 2014, p. 91).

If the female self is trapped or collapsed within the complexity of postmodern London, the male individuals are inseparable from the same fate. All the novel’s characters are unable to decode the signs of the postmodern city, and thus they are lost in its chaotic maze. Like Leah and Natalie, Felix Cooper was born and raised in Caldwell, NW. In “Guest”, the small section that is centered on only one day in Felix’s life, the reader is introduced to his past life. He is in his early thirties, from Caribbean ancestry. Born to a poor immigrant family and working as a mechanic in precarious conditions; he is another example of a subject trapped by complexities of class and ethnicity. Kristen Shaw (2017) describes Felix’s condition as “indicative of the socio-economic inequalities existing within London, constantly passing consumerist symbols of the capital’s wealth to which he is denied” (p.11). His discussion with his father’s socialist friend, Phil Barnes, about the hard economic situation of London’s urban communities reflects the harsh reality of contemporary London. The old man’s lamenting of the “fall of working-class agency” and “the collapse of collective working-class culture” (Becker, 2024, p. 11) is contrasted by the brutal working conditions that Felix experiences. The old socialist values have no place in contemporary merciless London.

Unlike Natalie and Leah, Felix has an optimistic vision and believes in the possibility of new beginnings, an idea that was crushed by his tragic ending. He used to be a drug addict, but now he is trying to establish a new life. In the section that recounts the last day in his life, he meets Tom, a young white male attempting to sell his father’s car, who struggles to relate to Felix upon knowing that he is Black. Attempting to connect, Tom asks Felix for drugs, revealing the

persistence of racial stereotypes and fixed assumptions that Felix suffered from throughout his life. On his trip towards his home by the underground tube, he quarrels with two young black men (one of them was his childhood neighbor Nathan Bogle who becomes a drug gang) as he wants to force them to give up their seats for a pregnant white woman. They respond to him with a disrespectful attitude and aggressive comments. The incident suggests that Felix “is doomed to remain defined by his race, perpetuating a history of racism, prejudice, and fear that arguably characterized late-twentieth century relations” (Shaw, 2017, p. 15). After leaving the station, he is attacked and eventually killed by the two men. Felix’s short and tragic life reflects Smith’s vision of the doomed, crushed individual. Smith shows that in the postmodern world, “one’s fate in the city starts or ends with grave” (Lehan, 1998, p. 272). This echoes Baudrillard’s vision of the postmodern city as a city of death. He claims that “the cemetery no longer exists because modern cities have taken over their function: they are ghost towns, cities of death. If the great operational metropolis is the final form of an entire culture, then, quite simply, ours is a culture of death” (as cited in Beville, 2013, p. 611). The section’s ending with a young girl wearing a summer dress, indifferent to the tragic accident that occurred earlier in the same place, signifies how the citizens fail to share empathy with their neighboring community. This signals how the contemporary city crushes individual lives and the sense of community that was the basis of its foundation.

Nathan Bogle is another male protagonist whose dreams were crushed by the harsh reality of the city. In a conversation with Natalie near the end of the book, he confessed, “Everyone loves a bredrin when he’s ten . . . After that he’s a problem . . . That’s how it is . . . There’s no way to live in this country when you’re grown” (Smith, 2012, p. 374). He was one of Leah’s and Natalie’s classmates, once hopeful and brilliant, but now he does nothing except wander around NW smoking, selling drugs, and sometimes providing services as a pimp. He complains about his harsh life, saying “Different life. No use to me. I don’t live in them towers no more, I’m on the streets now, different attitude. Survival. That’s it” (Smith, 2012, p. 374). Bogle is another crushed individual in the maze of London. While the characters in *NW* are unable to change their fate, and while the chaos of the maze prevails, Smith confirms that the individual is no longer independent, controlled by the city power, locked within the system.

In the novel final scene, Natalie reaches Leah’s house, Leah has already heard Felix’s death reported on the TV news. For no particular reason, they both suspect Nathan for Felix’s murder. Natalie concludes: “We wanted to get out. People like Bogle—they didn’t want it enough” (Smith, 2012, p. 380). The story ends in the same place it begins, with the two heroines sitting in the fenced backyard. Smith deliberately conveys the sense that all characters are trapped in one way or another. Through this gloomy ending, Smith reminds the reader that “the freedoms afforded to us—the liberties of the market—are in fact working against us, making us less, not more, free. We are not empowered but trapped by what makes us . . . free to choose” (Marcus, 2013, p. 70).

In his vision of postmodernism, Baudrillard sees late capitalism and consumerism as a “giant implosion” where “the individual [is] overwhelmed and overstimulated by a blitz of media and fashions, until nerve endings are naked and frayed, reality becomes surreal . . . subject fraught in the hyperreal” (Lehan, 1998, pp. 277-78). In a similar vein, Smith admits that the claimed

freedom of the late capitalist economic regime is illusory saying, “The charming tale of benign state intervention [is now] relegated to the land of fairy tales: not just naive but actually fantastic” because “the state is not what it once was. It is complicit in this new shared global reality in which states deregulate to privatize gain and reregulate to nationalize loss” (as cited in Marcus, 2013, p.72). With such a background, it is natural that the protagonists’ lives are determined by where they grew up, and how their freedom and social mobility are affected by repressive economic choices made by the state. Thus, London is not perceived as a city of accomplished opportunities or self-achievement but “the London of *NW* traps you, grinds you down, and never lets you go” (as cited in Marcus, 2013, p.72).

In fact, this sense of loss and fragmentation is not only achieved through character portrayals, but Smith’s disruption of time and place and use of varied narrative techniques affirm the maze-like quality of the novel as well. Time and place intersect in the novel, past fuses with present and future, and places hold temporal meanings, or as Robson (2012) suggests, “places become periods” (p.46). Smith mixes different narrative styles in the five sections that compose the novel. The narrative style ranges from “Staccato associative, parsimonious and present tense” (Robson, 2012, p. 46) style in the novel’s first section, into a modernist stream of consciousness in the second section, reaching the third section which Smith divides into 185 numbered subsections, many of them like tweets written in 140 characters to recount Natalie’s life. Although she uses the omniscient third person voice, she sometimes addresses the reader directly like “Reader: Keep up!” (Smith, 2012, p. 147). It is said that Smith’s writing style is influenced by many writers as James Joyce, E.M. Forester, and Martin Amis, but she fuses this narrative heritage in a way that challenges the reader, thrusting him in the maze of *NW*, moving between characters, places and times. These narrative shifts and fragmentation create a book “in which you never know how things will come together or what will happen next” (Enright, 2012). In her defiant style of pagination and punctuation, Joycean stream of consciousness, intersection of space and time, use of metafiction and cartography, Smith “works to undermine all of the ways in which this novel is equal to the challenge of showing it- lightly, irreducibly” (Robson, 2012, p. 48).

In her debated essay “Generation Why”, Smith (2010) launches a harsh attack on social media, and its influence on individuality:

When a human being becomes a set of data on a website like Facebook, he or she is reduced. Everything shrinks. Individual character. Friendships. Language. In a way it’s a transcendent experience: we lose our bodies, our messy feelings, our desires, our fears. It reminds me that those of us who turn in disgust from what we consider an overinflated liberal-bourgeois sense of self should be careful what we wish for: our denuded networked selves don’t look more free, they just look more owned.... One nation under a format.

In *NW*, Smith repeats the attack, but this time it is launched against the modern complex urban London, in which opportunities are multiplied then lost, individuality is reduced, and humanity is crushed. Zadie Smith directs our attention to the pervasive inequality and adverse consequences associated with limitless possibilities and boundless opportunities within the context of a postmodern society. She reminds us that the existence of the contemporary city costs a high price, which is paid by our individuality, our freedom, and our true selves.

4. Conclusion

Whether it is the epitome of civilization, modernity, and urbanization or a maze, trap, and site of erasure, no single narrative can give a complete truth of the city. Each text gives a different image of it. Conceptualizing the city through literature becomes a way of envisioning its reality. Navigating the maze of multicultural London, this paper attempted to conceptualize the city in postmodern literature as manifested in Zadie Smith's novel *NW*. Focusing on the city as a postmodern entity that is decentered, fragmented, chaotic, and plural site poses certain questions about its reality. In Baudrillard's view, it is a hyperreal site constructed by simulacra of signs, manipulated by the consumer's object. So, if the city is constructed to satisfy human needs, it may now frustrate the individuals to meet their needs. Envisioning the city as a system of power that attempts to control humans within the confinements of the system, Smith sees the city as an urban maze in which chaos prevails, and which is characterized by indeterminacy, and cruelty. The city's chaos affects its dwellers who become unable to decode its urban signifiers, and unable to find a transcendent meaning of their lives. In doing so, it restricts their freedom, diminishes their humanity, and leads to human isolation and anxiety. Thus, characters in Smith's novel are portrayed as lost, collapsed, or crushed by the city's power. Their fates are predetermined by poverty, inequality, or voicelessness. Smith confirms through her tragic vision of the postmodern city that the individual is no longer independent, but controlled by the city power, locked within its confining system.

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