

Belonging in the Postcode: Second-Generation Identity in Zadie Smith's NW

Xiaochan Diao

*School of International Studies, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, China
twinklechoxx@163.com*

Abstract. Zadie Smith, a prominent contemporary British writer, centers the complexities of immigration and urban life in her fiction. Her acclaimed novel *NW* specifically examines the lived experience of second-generation immigrants in multicultural Britain, offering a nuanced critique of contemporary urban society. Moving beyond traditional frameworks of diaspora studies, this paper explores the profound spatial dimensions of second-generation immigrant identity in *NW*. By establishing the concept of "postcode belonging", this paper argues that local urban space functions simultaneously as a comforting emotional homeland and as a rigid socioeconomic boundary for Smith's characters. Through textual close reading, the paper investigates the protagonists' traumatic process of self-formation, paying particular attention to the psychological costs of social mobility and the politics of racialised respectability. It further suggests that Smith's fragmented narrative structure formally registers the disjointed and unstable experience of belonging in the contemporary metropolis. Ultimately, *NW* challenges the linear narrative of immigrant success by revealing postcolonial identity as ongoing, precarious, and spatial mediated struggle.

Keywords: Zadie Smith, *NW*, second-generation identity

1. Introduction

Zadie Smith is widely recognised as a preeminent figure in contemporary British literature and is frequently cited by critics as one of the most significant Black British authors of her generation [1]. Her 2012 novel, *NW*, makes a distinct departure from the relatively optimistic portrayal of multicultural London found in her breakthrough work, *White Teeth*. Instead, *NW* dismantles the illusion of harmonious integration to present a starkly class-divided urban landscape. Centred on four second-generation immigrants, the narrative illustrates how their identities are intricately constructed within the specific micro-geographies of north-west London, encompassing its streets, council estates and transport networks. As Tolan [2] observes, Smith's later fiction turns towards a "spatialised ethics", wherein the material reality of the city dictates both human connection and alienation. Consequently, a critical interpretation of the novel requires conceptualizing urban space not merely as a passive narrative setting, but as a constitutive force in postcolonial identity formation.

The concept of "postcode belonging" provides a crucial theoretical lens for understanding how the novel's characters negotiate their fragmented subjectivities. This paradigm refers to a localised,

highly precarious mode of identity construction, wherein a specific postal district functions simultaneously as an affective anchor and a rigid social barrier. As contemporary spatial theory asserts, space is actively produced through intersecting social relations across multiple scales [3]. In *NW*, postcodes regulate racial visibility, dictate class mobility, and delimit economic opportunity. They establish invisible borders that demand a profound psychological and physical toll from those who attempt to transgress them. Consequently, Smith's characters do not merely occupy a liminal cultural space in the traditional diasporic sense [4]; rather, they are inextricably bound by the spatial realities of their childhoods struggling for self-definition in a metropolis where social legitimacy is continually measured by geographical origin.

This paper contends that *NW* articulates the identity of second-generation migrants as a localised, unstable, and unequal construct, shaped fundamentally by the spatial topography of north-west London. To demonstrate this, the article first reviews existing scholarship to situate the novel within contemporary spatial discourse. It then analyses how postcodes function as social-spatial maps that disciplining both memory and social inequality. Following this, the paper explores the psychological cost of upward mobility by contrasting the protagonist Natalie Blake's traumatic self-construction with the divergent spatial experiences of other three central protagonists—Leah Hanwell, Nathan Bogle and Felix Copper. This juxtaposition reveals the illusory nature of framing socio-economic success as a definitive "arrival". Finally, the essay argues that Smith's experimental, fragmented narrative structure serves as a formal manifestation of the fractures experience of urban belonging, ultimately demonstrating that identity in the contemporary metropolis is an ongoing and precarious spatial struggle.

2. Critical perspectives on space and identity in *NW*

Recent scholarship on Zadie Smith identifies as a significant shift in her literary trajectory. Critics generally concur that while *White Teeth* celebrates a fluid, integrated London, the city depicted in *NW* is deeply fractured by racial and socioeconomic divides, presenting a more austere and contradictory vision of British multiculturalism. In this vein, scholars have argued that the dismantling of the post-welfare state effectively traps marginalised groups within specific architectural spaces [5]. *NW* thus rejects the euphoric postcolonialism of the late 1990s, turning instead towards a stark realism that interrogates the unfulfilled promises of the era for the descendants of the Windrush Generation [6].

Consequently, contemporary critiques frequently interpret *NW* through the lens of urban geography and neoliberal spatial politics; however, they often overlook the individualised manifestations of these spatial dynamics at the character level. For instance, Upstone [7] examines how the novel's spatial boundaries act as mechanisms of state control, arguing that the postcolonial city remains a site of persistent segregation. Similarly, critics have applied McLeod's framework of "unequal proximity" [8] to *NW* to explain why characters sharing the same postcode occupy starkly divergent social strata. While these macroscopic theoretical perspectives effectively elucidate the political-economic logic of Smith's London, an overreliance on macro-spatial theories of foundational thinkers such as Lefebvre [9] and De Certeau [10] has, to some extent, obscured the profound psychological impact of these boundaries on individual subject formation.

To address this critical lacuna, the present study integrates spatial theory with textual close reading to demonstrate how hyper-local boundaries discipline the characters' psychologies and shape the novel's experimental form. Although existing research frequently interprets stylistic discontinuities in *NW* as manifestations of urban displacement [11], it is equally vital to link these formal choices directly to the nuanced mechanisms of self-formation among second-generation

migrants. Centred upon the concept of "postcode belonging", this paper bridges the macro-politics of London's geography with the micro-politics of naming, respectability and psychological alienation. Through a rigorous examination of textual detail, it illustrates how the seemingly mundane acts of crossing a street or altering one's name function to actively construct and deconstruct postcolonial identity.

3. The postcode as a socio-spatial map

The novel's title, *NW*, immediately establishes the paramount significance of the postal district. More than a mere geographical coordinate, the postcode functions as a stark socio-spatial map that delineates the boundaries of class, race and opportunity. The frequent invocation of specific place names, streets and transport routes compels the reader to view London through the bureaucratic, supra-local lens of urban planning and district management.

The core geographical location of the narrative is Caldie, the council estate where the four main characters were born and raised. This deprived housing development estate serves simultaneously as a repository of collective memory and a tangible embodiment of social entrenchment. Living in council housing, where residents must share their lawns and gardens with neighbours, is regarded as inhabiting an absurd world from which one must "climb a ladder" to escape [12]. For Natalie and Leah, who grew up within its confines, Caldie forms the unshakeable foundation of their subjectivities. Belonging to this specific postal district functions as an invisible passport that dictates external perceptions, whilst the residents themselves remain restricted by the psychological geography of the estate. Thus, even though Natalie perceives returning to her childhood district as a "killing" act [12], she retains an internalised identity inextricably rooted in her origins.

In contrast to Caldie, an insular micro-community where residents are intimately acquainted with one another's histories, the adjacent, broader neighbourhood of Willesden functions as a contact zone. Here, diverse demographics are not only forced into unequal proximity, but the illusion of an egalitarian multiculturalism is actively shattered. Diverging from the celebratory of diversity prevalent in early postcolonial fiction, Smith's Willesden presents a state of fraught coexistence. Individuals across racial and socioeconomic spectrums share the same pavements yet inhabit fundamentally disparate realities. On one side lie dilapidated shopping streets peddling budget goods and multilingual newspapers; on the other, casinos and luxury apartment complexes [12]. The local geography mandates contact between the affluent and the impoverished. Consequently, second-generation immigrants must navigate this polarized landscape, constantly negotiating whether their social station "was meant to be" or "was just not meant to be" [12], all the whilst being drawn into deeper ethical uncertainty [13].

Crucially, when characters transgress these invisible urban boundaries, the transformation required is not solely spatial, but deeply psychological. When Natalie successfully ascends the social ladder, she deliberately selects a residence that is "neither too close nor too far" from Caldie, positioned "just out of sight of that old house" [12]; thereby, her navigation of spatial hierarchy is internalised as psychological anguish. Despite her accrued wealth and relocation to an affluent enclave, she instinctively conceals her origins when questioned by a hotel receptionist. Far from providing a stable foundation for her identity, Natalie's spacious mansion only exacerbates her acute awareness of her racial visibility and deepens her alienation within her home city. Her true origins become a source of anxiety, and the possibility of achieving a definitive, stable identity is ultimately foreclosed [14]. Consequently, in the world depicted by Smith, postcodes are not neutral containers of human action, but rather highly charged social maps that perpetually generate a sense of displacement.

4. The psychological toll of social mobility

NW is structured into five distinct sections, with the first four dedicating focus to a specific central character. Natalie Blake's story takes up nearly half of the novel, fittingly titled "Host" [12]. By conventional metrics, she is the most successful second-generation immigrant of the four: she is a lawyer residing in an affluent neighbourhood, married to a man from a privileged background, and raising two children. As Hall [4] argues that identity is an ongoing process of construction, Natalie's exhausting project of self-invention formally begins during her university tenure, when she discards her Jamaican-inflected birth name, Keisha, in favour of the more British-sounding "Natalie". Her decision to break up with her Black boyfriend, her penchant for spouting grandiloquent platitudes, her refusal to join her close friend Leah at social protests, and her acceptance of a case involving Caribbean immigrants whilst identifying as Black, all these actions reflect her refined egoism [15]. Even with a meticulously crafted image of a professional, middle-class woman, Natalie's success is accompanied by a sense of fragmentation and alienation regarding her family, social background and her identity as Keisha, leaving her struggling to gain control over herself. As a Black woman navigating elite social echelons, she actively distances herself from the Caribbean heritage embodied by her parents, convincing herself she is "not a product of her parents" [12] and despising those who remind her of her past. The prolonged suppression of "Keisha" eventually precipitates a severe "self-loss" amidst her strive [15], which ultimately manifests in clandestine sexual encounters facilitated via the internet. These transgressive acts operate as her subconscious rebellion against the suffocating, performative perfection demanded by the persona of "Natalie". For her, realising the neoliberal ideal of spatial and social mobility does not constitute a triumphant "arrival"; rather, it exemplifies what Berlant [16] terms "cruel optimism", yielding only a profound sense of isolation.

Leah Hanwell, another female character in the novel, traverses a trajectory fundamentally opposed to Natalie's. Geographically and emotionally anchored to the Northwest, Leah lives only streets away from Caldie and occupies an unglamorous position within the local social services sector. The text repeatedly portrays Leah as deliberately stagnant: she lies in a hammock all day, unaware of "where there is", she refuses to "go forward" and has no desire to "arrive" [12]. She refused to conform to the norms of adulthood and parenthood through abortion and secretly taking contraceptive pills. Natalie's mobility breeds psychological division, Leah's stagnation engenders a melancholic paralysis. The deteriorating friendship between these two women forms the novel's central emotional conflict, illustrating that a shared geographical genesis does not guarantee a shared ontological reality. In Smith's London, remaining confined within one's postcode area can induce the same profound entrapment as attempting to escape it.

In stark contrast to Natalie stands Felix Copper, a Black man of Jamaican descent who harbours similar aspirations for self-improvement, yet whose narrative concludes in tragedy. Just as Felix attempts to reinvent himself and initiate a new chapter in his life, he is brutally murdered in a seemingly random street robbery. The perpetrator is Nathan Bogle, a fellow Caldie resident whom Felix had desperately tried to leave behind [12]. Nathan's moral degeneration and Felix's subsequent death serve as the ultimate, tragic embodiments of the Northwest district's spatial confinement. For these men, the prospect of belonging hangs precariously upon the whims of local street politics; their aspirations for upward mobility are violently, and fatally, thwarted by the structural limitations of their postcode.

5. Narrative fragmentation and the construction of identity

Smith's highly experimental, fragmented narrative structure formally captures the sense of disconnection and instability associated with belonging to the city. The novel deliberately eschews a coherent, omniscient narratorial perspective, dividing itself into stylistic sections that mirror the city's intrinsic chaos. Knepper [17] notes that this deployment of modified modernism enables Smith to portray the diversity of contemporary postcolonial London. The opening chapter, focalised through Leah, employs impressionistic and stream-of-consciousness techniques; its disjointed rhythm that mimics the chaotic sensory experience of navigating the crowded streets of Willesden. By dismantling the text into jarring encounters, communication breakdowns, and spatial transgressions, Smith forces the reader to experience the metropolis directly through the fractured subjectivities of her characters. Consequently, the novel's very form becomes central to its argument: the identity of the second-generation migrant cannot be adequately contained within the tidiness of a traditional, linear narrative.

Furthermore, Natalie's section is composed of 185 numbered vignettes, some of which consist of only a single sentence. Reading akin to a bureaucratic checklist or a legal case summary, this structure visually and rhythmically presents her life not as an organic whole, but as a patchwork of disjointed performances. A close reading of this stylistic choice reveals the profound disconnection at the core of Natalie's identity. While a preceding vignette might detail a moment of professional triumph, the subsequent fragment immediately undercuts this with a flash of racial alienation or profound loneliness. This fractured architecture exposes Natalie's middle-class identity as a meticulously curated, yet highly unstable archive, one perpetually on the verge of collapse because its constituent pieces refuse to seamlessly cohere.

NW's open ending, devoid of a thrilling narrative of triumph or self-realisation, highlights the fact that the struggle for a sense of belonging defined by postcodes is a prolong and endless process. Traditional diaspora literature often depicts a journey from alienation to the integration of identity [18], whereas *NW* actively deconstructs this process, denying the characters a final epiphany in which their homeland culture and British identity are reconciled. The novel's disquieting ending reflects a cruel and despairing reality: the spatial barriers created by postcodes are largely insurmountable, and this also highlights the difficulties of multicultural integration in British society [15].

6. Conclusion

In *NW*, the identity of second-generation migrants is a continuous and frequently traumatic negotiation of urban space and social boundaries. City spaces actively reinforce racial and class divisions, postcodes are not merely the backdrop to people's lives, but the core organising principle of their shattered subjectivities and social realities. Upward mobility cannot dispel the fundamental anxieties stemming from a postcolonial background, social advancement is merely a survival strategy fraught with compromise, a reluctant choice within the hostile framework of the neoliberal city. The physical and mental decline of those unable to cross these invisible boundaries serves as a stark reminder that belonging is an unresolved struggle that transcends local boundaries. Smith refuses to offer readers the traditional narrative of immigrant success, forcing them to confront the harsh reality of contemporary British class, racial and spatial segregation. For second-generation immigrants, identity has never been a static achievement, but rather an exhaustingly persistent struggle to cross the myriad boundaries within the postcode area they are forced to call home.

References

- [1] Walters, T. L. (2008). Title of work: Zadie Smith: Critical Essays. Peter Lang.
- [2] Tolan, F. (2013). Zadie Smith's Forsterian Ethics: White Teeth, The Autograph Man, On Beauty. *Crutique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 54(2), 135-146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2010.550340>
- [3] Massey, D. (1994). *Space, Place and Gender*. University of Minnesota.
- [4] Hall, S. (2015). *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*. Routledge.
- [5] Perfect, M. (2015). *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism: Diversity and the Millennial London Novel*. Springer.
- [6] Bentley, N. (2017). *Contemporary British Fiction*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [7] Upstone, S. (2016). *Rethinking Race and Identity in Contemporary British Fiction*. Routledge.
- [8] Mcleod, J. (2004). *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*. Routledge.
- [9] Lefebvre, H. (2012). *From the Production of Space*. Routledge.
- [10] De Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press.
- [11] Zapata, B. P., Author, B. B. (2014). 'In Drag': Performativity and Authenticity in Zadie Smith's NW. *International Studies: Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*, 16(1), 83-95. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ipcj-2014-0006>
- [12] Smith, Z. (2012). NW. Penguin Books.
- [13] Wang, Z. (2015). Politics of Space and Confusion of Ethical Identity in Zadie Smith's NW. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 36 (3), 99-105. <https://doi.org/10.16077/j.cnki.issn1001-1757.2015.03.019>
- [14] Shell, J. P. (2006). Chance and Gesture in Zadie Smith's White Teeth and The Autograph Man: A Model for Multicultural Identity?. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 41(3), 27-44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989406068733>
- [15] Nie, W. (2021). The Myth of Self-Invention for Second-Generation Immigrants in NW. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 42(1), 44-50. <https://doi.org/10.16077/j.cnki.issn1001-1757.2021.01.007>
- [16] Berlant, L. (2020). *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press.
- [17] Knepper, W. (2013). *Revisionary Modernism and Postmillennial Experiment in Zadie Smith's NW*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [18] Gilroy, P. (1993). *The black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press.