

Cityscapes in Zadie Smith's *NW*

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Abstract

The article focuses on the manner in which the space of the city is employed in Zadie Smith's *NW* so as to reveal not only a cosmopolitan map of contemporary London, but also to draw a map of the journey of the contemporary individual in finding himself/herself. Smith adopts in *NW* an experimental manner of introducing the contemporary individual in a strongly cartographed space both at the level of the city and at the level of the body of the text. Thus, through the space of North West London, the author speaks about family, social class, (inter-racial, marital) relationships, (complying or not with) gender roles (and dealing with the defiance against such roles), mobility (at the level of the cityscapes and at the level of the mindscapes), community and possibilities (and impossibilities) of belonging.

Keywords: *city; text; space; mobility; identity; self-fashioning of self.*

1. Introduction – the urban matrix and narrative goals

One of the first questions about the novel's construction interrogates the reason of bringing space to the foreground of the novel and using it in such an intense manner. John Hadlock, in the chapter "Between Urban Ecology and Social Construction: Environment and the Ethics of Representation in Zadie Smith's *NW*" (Michael 2018: 155–180) posits that Zadie Smith's purpose was that of creating a critical and moral relationship between art and the environment. Therefore, the novel becomes a projected image of the material world "that acknowledges the complexity of the relationship of humans and their environment(s)" (2018: 156) and speaks about mutual determination.

Critics have observed the strong scaffolding on which the novel is built in a network of streets and regions of London and around it, through which the characters move in a profuseness of experiences. Thus, Smith introduced a large gamut of “possibilities of a spatially-oriented approach to narrative” (Knepper in Tew 2013: 114) with the purpose of revealing the nature of the contemporary individual and of the contemporary London society. In fact, Smith was credited by Wendy Knepper, in “Revisionary Modernism and Postmillennial Experimentation in Zadie Smith’s *NW*”, in Tew (2013: 111-126) with building a “spatial poetics” through “a spatially configured story [...] in a globalizing neighbourhood”. (2013: 112)

Lynn Wells, in the chapter “The Right to a Secret: Zadie Smith’s *NW*” in Tew (2013: 97-110) remarks the intimate knowledge that Zadie Smith has of the northwest region of London in which she grew up, “an area of the city, notorious for poverty, crime, and interracial tensions.” (2013: 98) Such intimate knowledge of the space allowed her to sketch a realistic representation of the life here under all its aspects.

The main technique she employs in order to make such a presentation more complex is that of the movement of the characters through the city of London with the purpose of developing “discourses of class, gender and ethnicity” (Bentley 2018: 738). The idea of *mobility* is developed in the novel on more levels: the individual takes a journey through the streets of London, above the ground and (s)he goes underground at the subway, (s)he encounters obstacles on the way, (s)he climbs flights of stairs and reaches open terraces in a type of mobility which invites the mind to kinetically explore more dimensions. Molly Slavin remarked this fine weaving of the new urban fabric:

The postcolonial northwest of London of Zadie Smith is not the London of Boswell, Johnson, Dickens, or Woolf even though the area is expansive enough to encompass many ideas of what it means to live in this space at this particular time. Multiple geographies were visible in *NW*, layered on top of and next to

each other, weaving together to form an urban fabric. (Slavin, 2015: 98)

Lauren Elkin (2015: section 1 and 2) also remarked the idea of mobility both at a denotative and at a connotative level:

The novel's emphasis on physical mobility is matched by Smith's interest in figurative, social mobility. [...] Leah, Natalie, Felix, and Nathan's lives intersect like the lines on the map of the Underground; like commuters, they pass each other in the street and only dimly register each other's presence.

The choice of the space of the city as a valid dimension of illustrating the contemporary ontological state of the individual comes from the fact that Smith has always felt/experienced acutely the space of London. Born in North West London, her personality was shaped in this space, she developed here, she felt various forms of pressure in it. But, ultimately, the fact that she takes London as the main narrative space in more of her novels seems to be indicative of the fact that she adheres to Homi Bhabha's opinion that 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 1994: 170)

Bhabha refers here to national narrative (the type introduced by Salman Rushdie), but Slavin posits that the narrowing of the frame – from the national to the contemporary/ cosmopolitan urban space – manages to achieve the same narrative goal. Similarly, Prakash & Kruse assert that “the city can be understood as a subset of multiple modern practices and imaginations” (2008: 4); therefore, it could be said that *NW* paints an image of a micro-society which could be taken as a portrait of the contemporary Britain/ world with its multicultural, eth(n)ic,

ideological, or even psychological tensions. Caroline Lusin, in “The Condition of England Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Zadie Smith’s *NW*” (2012) and Jonathan Cohen’s *Number 11, or Tales that Witness Madness* (2015)” in Nünning & Nünning (2018: 247–263) stylistically interpret the area of NW as a synecdoche for the nation as a whole (2018: 254). Zadie Smith introduces her view on mobility from the urban to the national in strongly charged social observations of the sort: “There is a difference between the ambitions of the poor of the city and the poor of the country” (p. 23), or in assertions bearing a strong socio-political reference with connections to Margaret Thatcher: “Today this is Brent. Tomorrow it could be Britain!” (p. 44)

Wang (2016), too, remarks the employment of space as a materialization of social class and acknowledges the importance of the space of London in shaping the consciousness of characters and in partially configuring their identity.

Marcus (2013) observed the same foregrounding of the spatial dimension to the detriment of the temporal one, or the use of the spatial dimension as a device through which other aspects of the novel are introduced: identity, ethics, the possibility of making choices, making and maintaining interpersonal relationships, etc.

We begin in the outer margins of Willesden, move through Kilburn into the posh inner-city of Soho before then circling back out to Hampstead, where the spinning top of our narrative drags to a halt at its outskirts: in an area where the neat rows of single-family homes turn into abandoned lots and broken bridges and, eventually, overgrown heath. In the puzzle-piece streets of Northwest London, we realize that there is very little that provides coherence but the estates themselves.

The extent to which readers of *NW* not living in London (or in Britain, for that matter) manage to identify themselves with the universe of such a novel seems to be rather large. Kristian Shaw in the chapter “Global

Consciousness. Local Consciousness': Cosmopolitan Hospitality and Ethical Agency in Zadie Smith's *NW*" from her study *Cosmopolitanism in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (2017) describes London "as highly fluid global city" (2017: 68). David James (in Platt & Upstone 2015: 58) is of the same opinion that Smith manages to extend from the local to the global – she writes a type of fiction that is "confined in location but capacious in implication, circumscribed in incident yet global in ambit". In the context of the intense contemporary global movement of the individual, more readers worldwide can feel the validity of issues in the novel such as migration, interethnic relationships, social stratification, gender differentiation and the tensions arising from today's indeterminacy of gender relations, the sense of belonging to a space, the need for privacy within the "space" of the couple, the difficulties of defying societal norms, the loss of the individual in the highly fragmented/divided contemporary world, the struggle of keeping one's identity in a pool of societal and interrelational compromises, social class limitations, etc.

The novel charts the development of interconnected lives in Willesden, exploring the ways in which ethnicity, class and personal relationships play a role in the construction and maintenance of localised urban communities in the post-millennial world. *NW* explores the unspoken symmetry and synergy between local and global processes, fusing the cosmopolitan with the quotidian. (2017: 69)

2. Experimenting with form – or juxtaposing urban architecture with narrative architecture

In terms of style, Smith displays a rich array of modes and strategies in line with modernist and postmodernist practices, but also with realist writing. She has often been compared to James Joyce due to her use of stream of consciousness or to Virginia Woolf due to the use of the technique of perspectivization: presenting one and the same event or spatial dimension from the perspectives of more characters helps

achieving a complex picture of the reality encapsulated in the novel. John Hadlock in Michael (2018: 161) observes the extensive narrative play and employment of the experiment – hence, the novel makes use of

multiple forms (like lists, concrete poems, postcards, song lyrics) as well as play with the boundaries of paratextuality (NW uses numerous different methods for identifying and numbering chapters and sections) to lay bare the artifice of their representational and novelistic strategies.

Vanessa Guignery (2014) analyzes the 5 sections of the novel and identifies 5 different narrative modes which are indebted to 5 different literary traditions. We enlarge upon the pattern of analysis in what follows as a way of highlighting her “narrative mobility”, her power of being “mobile” at a paratextual level:

- “visitation” – Leah Hanwell’s life presented (in 95 pages) from April to August 2010, a stream-of-consciousness narrative, formed of 23 sections which strongly remind us of Clarissa Dalloway’s way of perceiving life around her; Smith is highly symbolic in this part: the tree (appearing even in a calligramatic representation on page 28), the fox (associated with transformation, but also with the “contradictions inherent in human nature” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996: 407) translated into novel under the form of the paradoxical opposition fertility–cunniness when we think of the character Leah who takes birthcontrol pills behind her husband’s back), number 37 (fragmenting 3 times the chronology of the 23 sections as interstitial chapters into the fabric of this part; accidentally or not, 37 is also the age of the author when she published the novel, so the number appears as a temporal bollard in (the journey of) her life to mark the writing of the novel¹); and the letters “NW/”nw” (in the postal code for North West London where the characters live, in one of the

¹ See Knepper in Tew (2013: 119) for supplementary discussion on the uses of 37.

character's e-mail address (keishaNW@gmail.com), but also in such subtle references as Natalie and Nathan "strolling to nowhere" (p. 310), or blunt declarations that Natalie is going "Nowhere." (p. 295), or at the very core of Leah's family name – Hanwell) have frequent occurrences in the text. In line with analyzing the symbolic, Nick Hubble (in Hubble & Tew 2016: 197) sees even Felix's death as symbolic and created with the purpose of allowing Natalie to go on living (similarly to the dichotomy Septimus–Clarissa from *Mrs. Dalloway*). Additionally, the annual Notting Hill Carnival appearing subtly, but constantly on the background of the novel, is a technique used by Smith to create "a context in which identities are changed or masked or set on stage, and characters break out of their accepted social roles in true carnivalesque fashion." (Well in Tew 2013: 102)

- "guest" – Felix Cooper's seventy-page long section presenting one day in the life of the character, the 27th August 2010 – a 3rd person narration about a man's struggle to break away from the past and reinvent himself (at an emotional, psychic and social level); it is with Felix that the struggle to escape one's past and societal constraints are most obvious; but he seems to suffer from the "pull of the meaner spaces" from which every character belonging to this "class-conscious, boundary-conscious London [...] wants to be able to leave", hence the Smith's obsessive use of the "getaway codes". (as Philippa Thomas remarks in "Zadie Smith. NW (2012)" in Whitehead & White (eds.) (2013: 271)
- "host" – Keisha/Natalie – a journey from the 1970s to August 27th 2010 in 185 episodes/vignettes (122 pages) rendering the social fragmentation of London and the fragmentation of the postmodern identity and juxtaposing the narration with multiple spaces in a frenetic voyage taken through a temporally compressed dimension; the idea of fragmentation was interpreted as necessary so as to render the identity of the city as being formed, in typical Woolfian thinking, from "orts, scraps and fragments":

Thus, through the representation of space in *NW*, Smith seems to suggest that London cannot be apprehended as a whole, not so much because it is too vast, but because such are its disparities that doing so would not allow us to make sense of it: the city's reality is not in its wholeness, but in its numerous fragmented pieces. (Nguyễn-Quang 2018: 83)

- “crossing” – a twenty-page section taking Natalie and Nathan after the murder day (Felix is murdered by Nathan) through 7 neighbourhoods/areas of London (Willesden, Kilburn, Shoot Up Hill, Fortune Green, Hampstead, Archway, Hornsey); Vanessa Guignery (2014) interprets the concept of “crossing” as marking four possible aspects in the novel: 1) connections between characters; physical crisscrossing of the characters during their journeys through London; 2) movements up the social scale and 3) weavings between literary traditions, 4) between modes of writing (bringing the high and the low culture together in terms of styles of writing and perception on life). The entire novel seems to unfold under the sign of people criss-crossing each other's lives – Smith herself described it as a novel “filled with strange encounters, local encounters between people of quite different class and background” (Smith 2012a, video on the YouTube, ‘NW, Zadie Smith’). Wells (2013: 98) believes that this urban narrative is affected by a sort of predestination “in which fateful meetings between characters occur due to geographic coincidences”, therefore, the cartographying practised by Smith seems to be put into the service of character portrayal and interaction or of other aspects connected to rendering the contemporary networked/networking (or not working) relationships in the urban space.
- “visitation” – an eleven-page section presenting Natalie and Leah, two days after the murder in an episode which seems clarifying and purifying – a final catharsis unfolding under the sign of “Clarity!”

that Natalie invokes (p. 329). The fifth part could, in fact, mark an epiphanic moment in the lives of the characters: an acceptance of the ending/ beginning of the journey into motherhood for Leah, a definitive acceptance by women of ending/ beginning to be who they are and as they are. Though this sounds paradoxical, what we mean is that the novel is an invitation to "visit" this subject of creating ourselves despite the spatial/societal conventions. So, despite the fragmented, "fractured walk" (Pope 2015: 174), the characters are provoked to "visit" themselves/their selves from the outside so as to obtain "clarity" and understanding of how they are determined and how they can emerge from behind so many masks worn in this carnival of life, from behind so many voices which they use in the attempt to answer the novel's obsessive question: "Who are we?". To support this idea, we remind readers of the last sentence of the novel: "'I got something to tell you', said Keisha Blake, disguising her voice with her voice." The movement Keisha/Natalie plays between her selves, her roles ("Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe.", p. 278) is indicative of the shift, the transformation and multiplicity of the selves that the contemporary individual is forced upon by the space/society he inhabits, while still attempting to preserve the authenticity of the individual.

The structure of the novel is relevant to the entire construction because, through the titles of the parts and through the manner of building their sections, the reader is taken on a journey of discovery of London and of its inhabitants in a rapid, prying movement upwards and downwards, inside and outside, forward and backward, to the left and to the right, to the north and to the south, on a map onto which the characters pinpoint various experiences. David James in "Worlded Localisms. Cosmopolitics Writ Small" in Platt & Upstone (eds.) (2015: 58) observes "a carefully choreographed unruliness that matches in form the local territory it surveys." Making a direct connection between

the shape/form/layout/architecture of the city and the shape/form/layout/architecture of the narrative,

her fictions offer quotidian domains of unexpected profundity, where the seemingly pedestrian movement from one action to the next is of secondary importance to the perspectival narration of significant sensory or spatial details along the way (*id.*: 53).

James explains that Smith creates in some scenes a web of reverberating images and sentiments just like the architecture of the space in the scene – the “cross-hatched” metal latticework of the “suicide” bridge, for example is suggestive of the complicated and intricate inner life of the character’s – Natalie’s in this case (*id.*: 57).

Philip Tew (2010: 102), when analyzing Smith’s work *On Beauty*, identifies a technique which she uses in *NW* as well: “Smith’s technique of overlaying and multiplying view-points, often refracted by others, is highly effective, adding depth to her perspectives.” The novelty comes from the fact that in *NW*, Smith found the perfect frame into which to pour all this – the city. In fact, the city looks like a multidimensional mould into which the reality of the novel has its essence molten and poured by the author managing to create a multi-layered structure of intricate strata, cohesively interconnected by a robust scaffolding of masterfully welded elements. But the novel is not perceived as a technical construct only as the element which holds everything together is a thin fabric of emotions. Zadie Smith urges to allow not only logos and ethosa, but also pathos in our lives: “emotion also has a place in public policy. We’re humans, not robots.” (Smith 2012b) in a preamble to a work published in *The New York Review*.

Wendy Knepper (in Tew 2013: 116) also proposes a multiple reading of *NW* due to the “spatially-oriented aesthetic” it develops. Thus, she proposes that the novel be read from three perspectives: the world as text (“*NW*” the area in London becomes the text *NW*), the text as world (the reader is challenged into finding his/her way in an

imagined cartograph) and all this by finding their way through the text as game. The invitation to undertake such a journey is made obvious by the author on page 38 of the novel, where she seems to be giving us GPS instructions on how to get from Yates Lane, NW8 to Barlett Avenue, NW6 with what seem clear temporal and spatial indicators. But, in fact, as Knepper explains, this is just a game played by the author, a parody of map instructions in a ludic undertaking which is meant to signal the discrepancies between the virtual and the real, between the lived and the imagined, between the experienced and the projected.

What is new in *NW* is the manner of making people interact and the laying of all these experiences on page. Writing about the metropolis is influenced, in contemporary times, by the recent changes in technology and communication which trigger new perspectives on people's (writers' and readers' alike) visual representations. For example, Smith plays with space at the level of the text: the layout of the text introduces us into very differently arranged texts from one section to another or within the same section. While reading – wandering/ strolling/ traipsing/ going through the space of the city/ book/city-book – we feel as if being on the map of an urban area with very differently built neighbourhoods and lanes/ roads/ streets/ boulevards/ motorways: section one, “visitation”, invites the readers to pay a visit to the life of one of the characters, Leah, introducing the reader into the intimate corners of her thoughts not only through a type of narration that plunges into the character's mind, but also through the much more subtle, but also more profound rendering of reality through her perceptions – the very short first six sections at the beginning of the novel introduce us through free indirect thought in Leah's mind and they quickly remind us of Virginia Woolf style in *Mrs Dalloway* at the level of painting the character and the space of London through the character's perceptions and reactions to the outer reality. But chapter seven does even more – the text is laid out on the entire page starting the chapter (p. 28) under the form of a tree. The author uses the technique of the pattern poem and introduces reality at the graphic level creating an even stronger visual rendering of the reality perceived by

the character – thus, the text becomes a structure with multi-layered elements. Another calligram appears three pages later under the form of a mouth to which Leah's perception of a person speaking is reduced. The very strong visual support illustrates a new dimension of the book – the spatial one. Smith's playful engaging into calligramatic writing on pages 28 and 31 appeals more strongly to readers' visual hunger in the age of the image. The second decade of the 21st century registered a strong manifestation of the need of the writer to transmit the message of the book at a graphic level as well. Pushed by the strong presence of the visual in our lives (TV, the Internet using static images and video, social media – see the cases of Facebook and Instagram, and so on) writers felt the need to make use of a multimodal construction to render narrative messages. Thus, novels such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010), Adam Thirlwell's *Kapow!* (2012), Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY* (2017) render the need to support the written message with a graphic form which is as daring as the message. In section three, "host", the 185 episodes seem to carry the reader in space and time in as many temporal and spatial points on the coordinates of Keisha's/Natalie's life. These vignettes display the characters' life as in an album with snapshots in which they are presented while passing through various emotions and states, discovering things about them, developing relationships, and experiencing various situations.

3. Fashioning cities vs. self-fashioning of individuals

John Hadlock in Michael (2018: 167) identifies the main questions behind the novel as being extracted from the epistemological queries initiated by modernist art and literature which introduced aspects concerning the environment-individual rapports:

How do humans know the world, and how do humans know where they fit in it? How can humans relate ethically to the world? How might the act of representing the world change

humans' relationship to that world? These questions are also central to *NW*.

The question "Where are you from?" appears on more occasions than one (even in its Italian version – "Di dove sei?", p. 234) and most of the times it receives no answer on the part of the receiver. But it does stir in him/ her a pondering upon origins. This is how Natalie considers herself "a city animal" (p. 253), "a city child" (p. 319), "an NW girl at heart" (p. 218) and this is how she divides people between the Camden Lock lot and the Caldwell lot (p. 185) or Caldwell and non-Caldwell (p. 270). Other characters identify themselves with the space they originate from ("I'm Hackney", p. 281; "I'm Harlsden", id.), therefore a central issue in the novel is that of the individual making/shaping himself/ herself and starting this transformation from the position/ level/ situation in which the space breeding him/ her positions him/ her.

John Hadlock in Michael (2018: 158) identifies self-fashioning as a critical concept around which the novel revolves and follows the manner in which human subjects and urban environments mutually shape each other (2018: 164). "How, in environments thoroughly shaped by human touch, do twenty-first-century city dwellers construct self-identity?" would be the question which Zadie Smith tries to illustrate through the narrative design. In this undertaking, the issues of economic oppression and identity politics are tackled while attempting to make characters step outside the limits imposed by a socially and politically determined space. The straightforward manner of signalling these issues is through the characters' anxiety, manifest on one occasion or another or through a paradoxical thinking and behaviour: "I want to stay still and to keep moving. I want this life and another" (p. 76).

The first perception of space is given through Leah's eyes and in rapport with her being – she keeps to the shade in the garden of a basement flat, "fenced in, on all sides." (p. 3) First, she experiences isolation and entrapment in the city. Later, it is in this space that she is forced to experience the invasion of her privacy (because of Shar, a woman who asks her for some money) and it is to this space that she

declares her allegiance: "Leah is as faithful in her allegiance to this two-mile square of the city as other people are to their families, or their countries." (p. 6) And it is in this space that she first demonstrates her empathy and desire of helping a fellow in need already introducing the issue of ethics to which the contemporary individual should adhere according to the message of the novel.

The relation the characters have to space is a perfect rendering of their anxieties because it shows one more time their fluctuation between loving it and wanting to escape from it. Announced by the image on the first page where the (archetypal) image of the garden is fenced in, images of this space from which the characters want/ need to escape complete the double perspective of attraction-rejection determined by the social conditions manifest/ experienced at one moment or another. Taking a journey on a bus with her mother and heading for the London tube, Leah seems to be escaping from the outer reality and entering the "underground" dimension before even reaching the tube and escapes in a bindi:

Sat opposite, Leah stares at a red bindi until it begins to blur, becomes enormous, taking up all of her vision until she feels she has entered the dot, passing through it 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 or sofas or (p. 44)

The paragraph finishes without a punctuation mark as the scene is interrupted by Leah's mother rambling, in a violent act of pulling her out from the world of the mind and invading her privacy. Though she does not exclude people from her alternative reality (in fact, she yearns for an intimate knowledge between them), Leah feels the pressure of the people around and she longs for privacy and calm in a frensically moving society. "Why won't everybody stay still?" (p. 76) she mutedly addresses the world a question several pages later. "She has forced a

stillness in herself, but it has not stopped the world from continuing on." (id.) She is in search of a calmness (on the same page Michel remarks "Calm as you like"), of an ease of mind, but she cannot find this in a hectically active space. She permanently feels the pull towards another space ("Perhaps she's been a city fox too long", id.), but she does not really feel the permanent attraction of the countryside.

On a different occasion, the characters move from the global to the local and the other way round: "Global consciousness. Local consciousness. Consciousness." (p. 251) or they are associated with the part of London they reside in – even if Natalie does not recognize the people in the park by their names, she knows them as: "Caldwell people, Brayton people, Kilburn people, Willesden people" (p. 284) suggesting the strong connection between space and individual most probably at a social, cultural, ideological level.

On page 29, Michel, Leah's husband, already observes the possibility and the need for self-fashioning that he can benefit from in the city of London and he expresses his desire to "move forward":

If I sit and do nothing I know that makes me nothing. From the first day I was stepping into this country I have my head on correctly; I was very clear: I am going up the ladder, one rung at least. In France, you're African, you're Algerian, who wants to know? There's no opportunity, you can't move! Here, you can move! (p. 29)

Another paralleling aspect in the shaping of the city and the shaping of the individual is connected to perspective – the urban space is viewed and built from the inside and from above; similarly, characters are viewed and built and see themselves from the inside and from above. The closer or more distanced perspectives offer a more intimate perspective from within the domestic space or they focus on the social. Felix feels comfortable and safe in "that clean room, that good place" (p. 167). But this opposition between private and public life is most obvious and most profoundly presented in Keisha's/ Natalie's space whose life

is presented as a permanent oscillation between the privacy of her room and the movement (escape) away from it in a semi-private atmosphere of the living-room/ salon of the social gatherings or in a (semi-)public space of the city. As a daughter in her mother's house, Keisha had always felt the pressure of the space of a cramped flat, but when this pressure is lifted for Natalie, the lawyer, she simply feels the comfort and authenticity of life in the domestic space (that is when she does not feel the pressure of children's presence) or she starts expanding her perspective on space and starts feeling more at ease in the expanded space of the city of London despite the "difficulties and ambivalencies" (p. 331) that this expansion brings with it.

Conclusions

Be it regarded as a synecdoche, a metaphor, a parody or an allegory of the contemporary world, the text and the space of *NW* (inside and outside the novel) has become an epitome of state-of-the-nation, but also state-of-the-contemporary-individual type of novel.

Backgrounded on an element of play, such concepts as mobility, encounter, belonging, fragmentation, or fluctuation seem central to the city-as-text or text-as-city imagined by Zadie Smith. Encounter sends to the idea of intersection, while Smith playfully depicts or illustrates the intersection of spaces, people, ages, styles of writing or literary traditions. At the same, encounter is also related to another central concept, that of mobility. The mobility of characters in space, the mobility of their identity, social mobility, intertextual and paratextual mobility, or narrative mobility often go against feeling a sense of belonging and allegiance to a space, or to an identity, perceived as constructs that ultimately render the feeling of rootedness. Mobility is thus doubly perceived: as positive, especially by migrants who are in search of a place and of an (established) identity, and as negative, by the ones who yearn for the tranquility, peace of mind and comfort brought about by motionlessness. With mobility as one of the central paradigms of contemporary living, the author perhaps wants to suggest that individuals

find it hard to find safety, to experience a sense of belonging and to figure out clearly who they are.

As in the case of migrants or in Natalie's case, the expansion of spatial coordinates along which they move is paralleled by, for example, social mobility and, at the same time, fragmentation at a personal level. This diminishes an individual's sense of privacy and comfort, or the intimacy of one's private self and causes a feeling of estrangement and confusion. Stripped of the outer layers imposed by society while experiencing the domestic environment or more limited spaces, the individual recovers the intimacy and peacefulness of the mind and body and, ultimately, his/ her selfhood, but most of the times he/ she is forced to put back those layers and have his/ her life forced between the limits and extremes of the private and the public, of the desired and the obtained, of the expected and the achieved, of the wanted and the imposed, of the sincere/ shared and the repressed.

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