

Performative Gender within *NW*

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Abstract

Zadie Smith's *NW* experimental and fragmented form interplays with the idea of meaning throughout the text. As a reader, it is hard not to draw upon comparisons to the self when reading *NW*. The act of reading *NW*, then, becomes a performance in which I, as a reader, engage in exploring meaning deeper and see how the text resonates with me. This essay explores gender as a performance of the active reading experience and one that resonates with the reader. Gender takes on the shape of a liquid identity throughout *NW*, and it is one that adds meaning to the form of *NW*, in that, gender comes to perform itself in adding meaning to liquid identities throughout the performance of reading *NW*. Gender comes to take on multiple meanings throughout *NW*, and it is one that the author explores further in this paper.

Keywords

Zadie Smith, *NW*, Literature, Contemporary Literature, Postcolonial Studies, Gender, Gender as a Performance, Feminism, Bell Hooks, Active Reading Experience

1. Introduction

Gender is a means of self-expression throughout Zadie Smith's *NW*. Smith states that reading is a "creative act", one where author and reader connect in a "quest for meaning" (qtd. in Perez Zapata, 2000: p. 193). Gender allows for fluidity and the ability to express oneself clearly and articulately throughout the novel. It is my contention that the active reading experience allows one to view *NW* as a greater socioeconomic text, in which one struggles to find his or her/self throughout the novel. By examining the novel *NW* through greater social and economic relations, as readers, one can argue that the novel becomes individualistic in its attempts to navigate socio economic norms. Through a greater analysis of *NW* as a whole, spiritually one finds themselves at a holistic standstill with the novel: constantly contemplating thoughts of identity and privilege. *NW* then becomes a means for

us to understand a greater social disparity within the novel, and one that allows for greater commentary on social and economic norms. Heteronormativity, then, becomes the main means that the novel is seeking to explore these questions, and it is my contention that *NW* is revolutionary in its approach to fighting systemic inequalities. Gender, throughout *NW*, can take on multiple meanings and comes into play as questions of socioeconomic status and questions of identity also intertwine to create meaning. Gender then means multiple things and must be constantly questioned in order to be an active participant in a society that reveres gendered-language as the norm. For instance, when questioning someone's gender, if it is proper to approach this person with personal favorite usages of gendered pronouns, and this person may assume an elite level of educational background from that context. Gendered language and gendered pronouns are an advance to a climatic society and one that allows for greater discussion and discourse to happen. Gender must mean several things and gender must take on multiple meanings in order to be highly contested in today's society. Gender might play a role in perhaps our language and our structure of language, but it is not one that criminalizes the norm. Gender, then, must be an "intertextuality" and a play on word formation (Perez Zapata, 2020, p. 180). Gender might play into multiple meanings, but it is this binary that allows for multiple meanings to coexist. Gender then must be a formation of language and language structure in our everyday textualities. Gendered meaning comes to play multiple times throughout *NW*. It is my contention that gender must mean in order to formulate a more thorough and expansive view of the world.

2. Gender's Meaning

What does gender mean throughout Smith's *NW*? Gender is a performative act in which one must struggle to find themselves within; it is a liquid, not a stabilizer, and thus must act in congruence with finding oneself. Gender and success become linked together, in that, gender allows success to mean more successfully. If I align with the certain cis-gender ideal of being female, I will experience more success than those who may be ambiguous because I am hetero-normative. In her complicated book of essays entitled *Bad Feminist* by Roxanne Gay, she states, "privilege is relative and contextual" (Gay, 2024: p. 19). Success and privilege take on similar meanings here in that both are "relative and contextual" (Gay, 2024: p. 19). Throughout *NW* themes of race, socioeconomic status, and gender prevail. Gender becomes linked to meaning success in that the femininity of Leah and/or Natalie become linked together to mean ideal feminine stature. Furthermore, the privilege of gender acts as an assailant throughout the novel. To quote Lange, "the novel seems to show that women are expected to pursue a career, but still remain less successful than their male colleagues" (De Lange, 1970: p. 10). The struggle for femininity throughout the novel is a discourse intermingled with feminism and success. The notion that success comes from those who denounce their heritage like Natalie is one that allows for meaning to flourish. To elucidate, "the

intertexts found in this section help to configure Natalie as being formed by a wide array of influences that present her as a woman who may potentially contain multitudes” (Perez-Zapata, 2020: p. 187). It is the complexity of Natalie that allows us to further understand many definitions of herself. She is constantly changing around people who define her, and like a gendered self, she cannot fully grasp a stabilized self; rather, it is fluid and liquid. As Joyce Carol Oates suggests, “perhaps there is no autobiographical core to Keisha/Natalie” (Oates, 2017: p. 290). Natalie’s true success throughout *NW* is her conformity to a gendered ideal: by being fully feminine, she accepts and tests the reality around her, as she constructs her identity. Though I may be experimental in my idea of gendered norms, it is through Natalie’s character within *NW* that I accept my fully functional pitfall of confirmation. My success, like Natalie’s success, is that I fall into the ideal of being feminine. Natalie’s insistence that she fits in the gender ideal of being feminine remarks on her “the insistence on recognition that gender is not the sole factor determining constructions of femaleness” (Hooks, 2014: p. 63). Rather, notions of success and identity become definitions for her in her written narrative on what it means to be female.

3. The “Dance” of Leah and Keisha/Natalie

Gender acts as a means of fluidity within *NW*. Gender comes in an oppressed form throughout *NW* with main characters like Leah and Keisha/Natalie. Because gender buys a certain privilege, Smith chooses to focus on and highlight the marginalized group of women throughout *NW*. Identity and finding oneself acts as a central theme throughout *NW*, and gender influences how we come to view and shape our gender and identity throughout the novel. Because we cannot fully know ourselves, *NW* is a novel of questions. How do we change and evolve over time and what historically situated us from the past, present, and future contexts? Because *NW*’s theme of gender is so pivotal to shaping and acts as a means of accessibility; gender is a way for social mobility to arise through identity. Gender is a nuanced way for Leah and Keisha/Natalie to acknowledge their privilege as cis-gendered females. Though their gender is non-linear like the structure of the novel, both Leah and Keisha/Natalie are forced to come to terms with their gender and its role within society. Socially acceptable means of accepting gender into society come in the way of their performative acts. Both Leah and Keisha/Natalie “dance” their way around throughout the novel; Leah literally “dances” and Keisha/Natalie figuratively dances her way around her identity formation (Smith, 2012: p. 30). This dance indicates a carefree attitude and artistic form of expressive movement. Dancing a way through identity requires more exertion than physical walking, and thus, dancing becomes a means of momentary femininity. Dancing allows one to express their gender. For instance, Leah “dances like a girl” and at the same time rejects her identity: “she is not a girl anymore” (Smith, 2012: p. 30). Meanwhile, Keisha/Natalie “dances” her way through her identity: her formation of her identity comes through momentary and fleeting glimpses, not grand textual

pauses. Keisha/Natalie's lack of wealth indicates her desire to be more in terms with her identity; however, she must exert herself in order to form her identity.

4. Gender Roles

Gender roles, while dichotomous throughout Smith's *NW*, come to take on new meanings. Gender is not only, then, a means of self-expression, but a means through which one can carefully and articulately express themselves purposefully. Gendering throughout *NW* becomes a form of self-expression and a means through situating oneself throughout the world. *NW* is a highly-contemporary novel, which then becomes a novel that might want to explore questions of gender throughout the novel more modernly. Gender is a dichotomy in that it is split between male and female roles. Characters like Felix and Nathan provide comic relief throughout the novel. Gender complicates roles throughout the novel and problematizes questions of identity throughout the novel. Keisha/Natalie is constantly questioning herself throughout the novel and Keisha/Natalie must seek to regain traction within the novel in order to stabilize herself. *NW* then becomes a novel which is geared towards questions of identity and allows oneself to find oneself throughout the novel. Gender is a problem throughout the novel because like its readers, we constantly question our surroundings and our awareness throughout the novel. Gender is a situated difference throughout the novel and allows for fluidity in exploring questions of identity.

Gender is a situation in which one may explore socioeconomic disparities within the novel. Socioeconomic problems like wealth and gender issues are a problem for Leah and Keisha/Natalie. Gender is a question of privilege throughout the novel. Who holds the privilege and why is it that privilege comes in the form of oppression throughout the novel? Gender is a question of identity and means through which finding oneself may occur. As a gendered person, I seek to identify with gender formations of literature because it allows for me to express myself more clearly. Silence through a form of oppression comes to mean in the aftertext of reading *NW*. The novel sticks with the reader in that it leaves us wondering questions of our own personal identity and questions of gender identification throughout the novel. Are we truly human to have these questions about *NW* after reading the novel? The form of the voiceless comes in the form of femininity throughout the novel. The voiced males throughout the novel complicate their issues with feminism. Feminism comes to be a form of finding one's voice throughout the novel, and it is a means through which one may argue that it is greater to be heard. Gay articulates a form of the voiceless in her collection of essays entitled *Bad Feminism* by stating: "When we say nothing, when we do nothing, we are consenting to these trespasses against us" (Gay, 2024: p. 181). There is complexity to being a feminist female. In discourse and conversation, the voiceless become oppressed through the form of doing "nothing" (Gay, 2024: p. 181). Nothing then becomes a form of expression and one way through which I find myself engaging in. I do not feel it is necessary to always comment on these types of identity, and

my meaning through this is a form of expression.

5. Feminism

Feminism is a means through which one identifies as an activist on a subject matter that there is little discourse on. Feminism is a means of expression because it means to become one with oneself and a form of inclusivity. Feminism then comes to mean a variety of forms of inclusion and self-expression, for which I am grateful for. Feminism can include a multitude of definitions and is one which is constantly changing and evolving. Through time, feminism is a means and act of battling oppression. Feminism is not a killjoy, but rather a struggle of finding oneself within the feminist context (Ahmed, 2024). Gender influences the readers' view of feminism throughout *NW* by complicating the question of identity; it acts as a stabilizing fluid. Gender becomes a liberating practice in that it allows us to find freedom in its discourse. Gender is a form or means of expression that allows for us to flourish readers' questions of identity throughout *NW*. Performance, throughout *NW*, is a means for us to express oneself and find ourselves through stabilizers. Performance becomes a stabilizing force in that it allows for expression to mean throughout *NW*. *NW*'s problematic problem lies in its ability to denounce God and theistic values. We, as readers, still struggle with this concept and try to find foundational tools for forming oneself throughout *NW*. *NW*'s problem is a means for us to express ourselves more articulately and grammatically through pauses and breaks. Pause for the meaning of gender in your life, and you will find meaning in a multitude of ways. *NW* then rests on the shoulders of giants like our forefathers, and seeks to compare its values to that of a little league. *NW* then should become a novel that tries to find its meaning throughout the discourse of femininity, and I would argue its experimental form and phrasing seek to grammatically correct itself constantly. *NW* becomes a means of self-expression, and one would argue that it is a means of expressive thought. I would like to argue that *NW* is a novel seeking novelistic adventures and one that allows for feminine expression to flourish. *NW* does not seek to balance nor negotiate these terms, but rather, seeks to find and express a more aligned way. *NW* is a means of expression throughout itself, and it can mean multiple things. I would like to argue that *NW* does not compare to itself value nor means of expressive thought. *NW* argues that femininity means self-expression.

6. Gendered Language

NW does not create problematic discourse throughout the novel. It is a form of expression in that it allows for meaning to flourish. *NW* complicates this problem by allowing for circular states and allows for one to mean a multitude of things. Gender then comes to mean a variety of states; it is constantly shaping and evolving itself to form new modes of expression. *NW* is a novel which consistently questions those gendered language problems that exist today. *NW* is a novel which allows us to question our humanity and how we seek to find the answers to

readers' questions of identity through the active reading experience. *NW* does not contend that it is a novel which forms self-expression; but rather, it expresses itself and seeks to find itself through the means of its experimental form. *NW* complicates the problem of gender and forms questions of identity with it. *NW* is a novel that complicates meaning and seeks to express itself in the form of gendered language. Language articulates itself in form and artistic expression throughout the novel; the shapes and form inform the novel of its experimental characters and their experimental attitudes with gender. By being sexually active and technologically promiscuous, the novel informs the questions of identity through which it informs self-expression. I do not identify as celibate; but rather, embrace my single attitude in life as a means of artistic expression. Gender does not conform to me; rather I conform to my gender role. As a fluid entity, gender allows and nourishes my artistic expression in my choice of identity. Though I do not use pronouns through self-identification, gender allows for me to grow and develop in a creative context. It is gender that allows for my individuality and my expressive self to form. Because I choose to be within a binary, gender allows for my expression to prosper. I believe gender allows for *NW* to act in its performative context fully.

7. Inclusivity within Feminism

Femininity within *NW* allows for an inclusive dialogue to happen. It is the sisterhood of Leah and Keisha/Natalie to bond and thrive. Womanhood is a bond that develops through textuality and relationships within *NW*. Gender becomes a form of self-expression because it allows for multiple meanings to happen. While I may identify as female, and negate my femininity at times for a more tomboyish approach, it is my contention that feminism must develop through a struggle and through time. Many women approach feminism as a struggle, and it is this consciousness-raising that gives awareness to liberation (Hooks, 2014). Freedom comes as a struggle, and feminism also comes as a struggle to many contemporary women. Modern-day feminists approach feminism through a struggle and their contemporary battles with understanding the context from which to understand how they align within this context. It is not always linear, but rather, a more complicated and spherical approach many women take, who identify as feminists. Women interact throughout *NW* as a means of voicelessness in their approach to feminism. They do not articulate that they are feminist beings. While their views on feminism are silenced throughout *NW*, it is important to note that this disparity remains within *NW* as a means of a struggle to their identity. According to contemporary feminist and professor bell hooks, "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (Hooks, 2014: p. 15). Both Leah and Keisha/Natalie do not fully self-actualize, and while their feminism is about actualization, it is my contention that feminism comes as a wealth disparity to them. They are not yet empowered enough to reach a form of language that allows for them to precisely speak on articulated feminist issues. Perhaps, motherhood is

a means through which Leah and Keisha/Natalie reflect and engage their success to mean more of an intersectional and third-wave approach to feminism. While Leah does not eventually have her baby, Keisha/Natalie does give birth. Motherhood becomes a performance that both Leah and Keisha/Natalie come to terms with. It is a performance that allows for them to “dance” their way around their identity and formulate their opinions. Motherhood then becomes a means of transgression throughout *NW*. Similar to women in third world countries, many do not identify the characters of Leah and Keisha/Natalie as feminists, but perhaps their textuality allows for a more complicated and nuanced meaning of feminism to flourish. Many women often relay their experiences with feminism as a struggle to come to terms with a specific language, and it is my contention that Leah and Keisha/Natalie relate the same disparity throughout *NW*: in an unvoiced, marked silence that reverberates and vibrates throughout the novel. Coming to terms with feminism allows for a deeper exploration of the self and an identification with a struggle. It is always important to recognize privilege within a contextual setting.

8. Historical and Contemporary Context

It is important to consider the historical and contemporary context within which *NW* is situated. *NW* operates as a novel seeking to explore economic and social disparities, while acknowledging one’s privileges and rights in a certain context. *NW* becomes for the reader a novel where questions of identity come to formulate and where the reflexive self connects with others in order to find themselves. Performances come through the “dance” that Leah and Keisha/Natalie stimulate in order to find themselves. Connection to others lies in their ability to form questions about others and the active reading experience allows us to start a dialogue in the context of this literature piece. The ways in which we form our questions about identity lay in our individuality. Perhaps, the novel is seeking to explore greater socioeconomic questions in relation to gender, which we will reveal later. Perhaps, like others, the novel seeks to form questions of identity as a response to questions of wealth and disparity among the wealthy throughout the novel. A responsible answer to textuality within the novel lies within the wealth of the novel’s complicated form: the experimental nature of the novel forms questions of privilege to those reading and to those interacting with the text. Do we understand the different methods of communication throughout the novel? What is the meaning of the novel’s form? How can we form greater questions about philosophical issues and life while questioning our humanity in our active reading experience? How can we come to know the active reading experience as a form of knowledge about reading the wealthy? What is the purpose of gendered language throughout the context of *NW* and how can we come to mean it in several ways? These are research questions I aim to explore as I further explore my graduate school options.

Talking about gender as a performance within Smith’s novel comes as a form of a means of oppression. Sexist thinking and misogynistic thinking dominate the context within which *NW* is situated. Gender is an issue that comes to take on

multiple meanings throughout *NW*. Gender is an issue which reverberates and vibrates textual meaning throughout *NW*. Gender throughout the novel becomes a complicated form of expression. Gender means multiple ways of expression might exist. Gender can take on new meanings and express ways to communicate on ritualistic ideals. I can come to identify with expression as a result of ritualistic ideals. Gender can mean new forms of expression for the self. I can identify with expressive ways to communicate in terms of gender identity. Identity means a fluctuation and gender acts as its unstable shape. Both Leah and Keisha/Natalie come to mean different things in relation to their ritualistic dancing.

9. Gender Binaries

Gender can allow for multiple meanings to exist within a context. Gender can allow for self-expression to exist. Gender comes to exist as a means of self-expressive attitudes. Attitudinally, gender does vary through forms of expression. It is this form of expression in the active reading experience that allows for a multitude of meanings to exist. I can identify with gender as a form of expression beyond the outlook of myself. By reflecting back on gender, my ideal is that I become more socioeconomically happy through my wealthy upbringing. I can relate to gender as a means of self-expression through the ways in which I identify my upbringing. This allows for my social attitude to change. It is through this form of linear idealization that I become more ingrained in patterns of thinking and coexist to become a more informed individual. I think I can become more of a mind on matters on issues of feminism by engaging in inclusive dialogues.

Gender ideals allow for modes of expression to exist. Gender ideals do fall into a binary, and it is that which changes, which forms my modes of expression. Gender does not allow my shape to change, and it is through this mode of expression that I become more informed. As information spreads, so does my attitude and changes to the environment also change.

10. Gender and the Body

Gender informs the body and its context. Gender does more than inform the body as it is situated within a specific context. Gender must inform the body then on an influential change. Gender as a fluid concept relates through time our ability to overcome obstacles within a historical context. Historical transgressions such as femininity change and evolve over time and do not repeat itself. Feminism comes to take on new and improved meanings through time and it is a study which allows for more forms of expression to come about. Gender does not form itself; it is situated within a context. Gender then comes to mean new meanings as we form and evolve our questions of identity. Gender does not allow for disparity, and thus my approach changes as I evolve my gender. Through gender, we can view the world in many lenses, and I get a sense of gender through its evolution in time. Gender can allow for more than one meaning, and I view gender as a form of self-expression.

11. Conclusion

NW, as a novel, seeks to explore greater socio-economic disparities and seeks to examine life from an enlarged picture. *NW* then becomes a novel, which allows for the reader to actively engage with the text and form an opinion about the text holistically. *NW* forces us to examine our own insecurities as readers and forces us to examine our own uninherited biological reactions to the novel. *NW* stimulates us to explore shapes and forms in new lights, and it is a revelation in exposing the truth. Furthermore, *NW* can and will become a text to be studied throughout high schools across North America because of its focus on interracial questions and questions of identity. Questions of identity, then, come to mean something else, and it is that for which I am grateful for publishing this paper. Identity then comes to form questions of interracial textuality, which we will discuss in future chapters of this book.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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