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**‘IN DRAG’: PERFORMATIVITY AND AUTHENTICITY  
IN ZADIE SMITH’S *NW***

**ABSTRACT:** Zadie Smith’s latest novel, *NW*, presents a multiverse in which multiplicity is driven into homogeneization by the forces of those dominant discourses that attempt to suppress the category of the “Other.” This paper focuses on the development of the two female protagonists. Their opposing attitudes towards motherhood, together with their confrontation with their origins, bring to the fore the performativity found in the discourses of gender, sexuality, class, and race. Thus, this paper will explore authenticity and performativity in a contemporary context, where patriarchal and neocolonial discourses still apply.

**KEY WORDS:** Authenticity; performativity; neocolonialism; intersectionality.

### **Introduction**

Postmodernism and the more recent focus on hybrid and multiple identities have celebrated decentred subjects who are always in flux. Although this conception of the subject has influenced various theoretical fields, it is in the feminist and postcolonial agendas that these discourses on multiracial contexts can be felt more strongly. Different theories derived from these fields have, in turn, raised questions on originality and the impossibility of conceiving the subject as whole and authentic. This has been an ongoing debate in postcolonial theory, which our increasingly globalised world has only encouraged. In the case of postcolonial and migrant subjects, the idea of a split

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identity has been the cause of a schizophrenic nature, as well as the source of a heightened perspective that allows them to partake of various cultures at the same time. However, this migrants' split identity has raised scepticism among some scholars. Linda Hutcheon remarked that "the postmodern rejection of the coherent subject is something of a "luxury," given the need of the majority of people from post-colonial countries to affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity" (qtd. in Davies and Sinfield 45). On the other hand, from a multicultural and hybrid perspective, the postcolonial or diasporic subjects' fragmented identity has usually been regarded, and even celebrated, since it may provide an advantageous perspective on reality. Other critics, such as Lawrence Driscoll, have warned against the almost excessive and systematic "idealisation of contemporary British literature and culture as a space of fluid, flexible decentered subjects" (1). Indeed, I would agree that there has been an idealisation of fragmentation, as well as an idealisation, and misunderstanding, of the concept of multiculturalism. The idea of multiculturalism that has prevailed, as Trinh T. Minh-ha argued, "doesn't get us very far" because, more often than not, it is still understood as difference between cultures, and not within the same culture or self (qtd. in Braidotti 12).

Contrary to this celebration of difference enhanced by multiculturalism and fragmentation, globalisation may potentially increase the search for sameness and the need to assert an authentic identity. Victor J. Cheng questions the contemporary search for authenticity in a global world where everything and everybody tends towards sameness. Cheng quotes Regina Bendix, who contends that "behind the assiduous documentation and defense of the authentic lies an unarticulated anxiety of losing the subject" (5). In the case of migrant or diasporic subjects, this anxiety is the result of a struggle between integration and the maintenance of one's origins. However, the process of integration has quite often been (mis)understood as assimilation. In fact, some critics have testified to an increase of assimilatory discourses. Liz Fekete has observed this tendency, and maintains that the pursuit of sameness and authentic national identities arises from governmental institutions whose policies depart from "multiculturalism towards monoculturalism and cultural homogenisation" (18). Although multiculturalism is still very much present in many cultural and literary contexts, it is certain that many narratives display the effect of assimilatory practices

and the migrants' anxiety derived from the struggle to maintain balanced hybrid identities that integrate various cultures without actually developing a schizophrenic subjectivity resulting from the internalization of those discourses that reject difference and enforce sameness.

Similarly, in the last decades, many feminist theories have criticised those essentialist discourses which ascribed inherent qualities to the category of woman and denied woman's multiple subjectivities, thus offering a monolithic idea of womanhood. Instead, recent theories have favoured an understanding of female subjectivity as multiple. Rosi Braidotti's metaphor of the nomad and nomadism rejects essentialism and conceives female subjectivity as always travelling, always in the process of becoming. Braidotti refers to Donna Haraway's theory so as to specify that nomadism should not be understood as "fluidity without borders but rather [as] an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries" (36). More recently, Moya Lloyd has defined this vision of female identity as "subject-in-process," that which is "inessential and open to transformation" (1). Lloyd, who revises a large extent of feminist theory in her study of identity politics, draws from Rosi Braidotti and others, such as Inderpal Grewal, Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, Teresa de Lauretis, Kathy E. Ferguson, and Chantal Mouffe, to argue in favour of the need to understand the subject as "ambivalent, in-process, indeterminate, and terminally open to reinscription" (27) and thus develop feminist political theories which truly consider multiplicity. Moreover, Lloyd places special emphasis on Chantal Mouffe's argument that it is the split and multiplicity attributed to the subject that explicitly allow for politicisation (20). Rosi Braidotti for her part highlights Deleuze and Guattari's warning against the increasing fragmentation that comes with a postmodern understanding of the subject, since this may lead to what they call "micro-fascism" at a local level (5). In addition, Braidotti points to Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's idea of "scattered hegemonies," which consider those aggressions at a more global level (5).

Recent feminist theories have also focused on the intersection of race, class, and gender as the categories or discourses that form, and oppress, female subjectivity. Gender itself has come to be understood as the category which more clearly exhibits the intersection of different forms of oppression. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, considers that "the subject is conceived as

engendered in race, class and sexual relations” (qtd. in Lloyd 24). Another way of approaching these discourses has been what Elizabeth Spelman has defined as “ampersand thinking.” According to Spelman, “ampersand thinking handles race, class, sexual orientation and gender conceptually, as if these factors are separate atomic particles, metaphorically speaking, which bump into one another accidentally from time to time and occasionally stick together” (qtd. in Lloyd, 45). Nonetheless, Richa Nagar has pointed out that “reiterations of the trinity of class, gender, and race sparked criticisms in several quarters for their lack of engagement with questions of ableism and heterosexism” (33). Furthermore, the hierarchization of the various types of oppression to which women have been subjected has been widely criticised. Pratibha Parmar has pointed out that “such scaling has not only been destructive, but divisive and immobilizing” (107). Therefore, the concept of intersectionality should not only be broadened, but it should also consider all these factors operating at the same time. Braidotti’s figure of the nomad is understood in such terms. She specifies that “axes of differentiation such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and others intersect and interact with each other in the constitution of subjectivity, [and that] the notion of nomad refers to the simultaneous occurrence of many of these at once” (4). For migrant women, patriarchal and colonial discourses have been said to combine in such a way that they exert what has been termed as “double colonization” (McLeod 175). The theory of double colonization incorporates the interconnected occurrence of the axes of differentiation that Braidotti considered. Thus, the metaphor of colonization may be used to analyse the reality of the multiple oppressive discourses that play some role in the formation of female subjectivities.

### **On the Rejection of Origins and Impossible Selves**

Many characters in Zadie Smith’s novels show a split personality which is the result of migration and this split can still be acutely perceived in the second and third generations. Even though the younger characters are very much established within the host cultures, by no means are their identities stable. Zadie Smith’s first novel, *White Teeth*, as well as her persona, were classified as representative of a multicultural society at the beginning of the new millennium. However, the celebration of

multiculturalism in *White Teeth* is rendered problematic and burdensome, since what comes to the fore is the pain suffered by different generations of migrants as they try to integrate into the host culture, and the development of a double consciousness that only the character of Irie Jones seems to be able to balance. I agree with Dominic Head's indication that *White Teeth* is "part celebration, part cautionary tale, [and] an apt summation of the triumphs and the limits of British multiculturalism at the end of the century" (111). It is also in her earliest novel that Smith starts to play with the deconstruction of the idea of a pure or authentic identity, especially when national, racial, or ethnic identities are considered. Indeed, one of the characters of the older generation, Alsana, articulates quite well this argument when she comically states that "it's still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe . . . . It's all fairy-tale (Smith, *White Teeth* 236). Smith's novels after *White Teeth* continued to focus on issues of authenticity. *The Autograph Man* (2002) worked with the metaphor of the "original," and *On Beauty* (2005), with class, race, and gender relations. All these issues have persisted in Smith's narrative to date. Before *NW*, her latest novel, came out, the marketing campaign publicised it as a novel about class. While it is certain that the concept of class is central in the novel, race, gender, and sexuality also disclose the interconnection of oppressing discourses present in the formation of subjects currently living under the influence of neocolonial and neoimperialist discourses.

*NW* narrates the lives of four main characters: Leah, Keisha (who will change her name to Natalie), Nathan, and Felix. These characters share a common working-class origin, localized in the imaginary Caldwell estate in Willesden. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the female protagonists. The novel presents Leah and Natalie in their thirties, struggling with adulthood, and looks retrospectively into their lives, displaying different stages of their identity formation. As will be shown, the interconnection of axes of differentiation and the oppression exerted by the dominant discourses on class, gender, race, and sexuality are very much present in the novel, which shows quite explicitly the constructedness and performativity that they may entail.

The first section of *NW*, "Visitation," narrates Leah's life crisis, which is mostly caused by motherhood, and, I would argue, an unresolved sexuality. However, race also appears to be part of the

conundrum. Zadie Smith argued that she wanted to reverse the Western centre/periphery dualism by marking Leah's whiteness (qtd. in Mullan). In fact, Leah is described as isolated, ashamed, and 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. Nevertheless, Leah's underprivileged position is mostly the result of class. The narrator explains that when Leah and her husband, Michel, of Algerian origin, are invited to higher class parties

most often at Natalie's house, where she and Michel are invited to provide something like local colour, they look down at their plates . . . letting Natalie tell their stories for them, nodding to confirm points of fact, names, times, places. Offered to the table for general dissection these anecdotes take on their own life, separate, impressive (96).

As a multiracial couple, Leah and Michel represent a multicultural image that is commodified in the novel. Furthermore, they seem to have been colonized by those belonging now to the upper classes, who speak for them, dissect their lives and limit their agency. This description points to the idea defended by the author herself that "colonialism is all about class" (qtd. in Nasta 275). Here, nevertheless, the novel presents a colonialism-in-reverse of sorts, although this is not the only colonizing attitude that Leah encounters.

Leah is subjected to what can be considered to be heteronormative colonization in terms of sexuality and gender. With regard to Leah's sexuality, I would argue that there are episodes in the novel which point towards the suppression of lesbian desires and the acceptance of heterosexuality as an imposed discourse. In the "Visitation" chapter, there are several sections under number "37," as well as the elision of section 37 in the "Host" chapter. The events narrated in those chapters, their misplacement, and even their silencing in "Host," reveal important details of Leah's sexuality. In fact, narratively, they can be read as the unconscious reflection of Leah's sexuality and the potential marginalization of those who do not submit to heteronormativity. The first chapter "37" narrates one of Leah's youthful lesbian relationships with a girl obsessed with the number 37. Leah confesses that "she once was a true love of mine. Now that girl is married, too" (48). The second chapter "37" narrates Leah's third abortion. The third "37" chapter appears to be the speech given

by "The Black Madonna" of Willesden, who seems to ask Leah directly "Did you hope for something else? . . . Who are you? . . . Could things have been differently arranged, in a different order, in a different place?" (82). In the last "37" chapter, Leah confronts a strange coincidence. When picking up some photographs, the pictures of a girl named Shar, a former schoolmate who tried to scam her at the beginning of the novel and with whom Leah has been somehow obsessed, appear in Leah's envelope. After some confusion and rage, the narrator says that Leah "looked and saw what was there. The girl. Her photos. My envelope. . . . Like a riddle in a dream. There is no answer" (109). There are further references, scattered through other chapters, that bring to the fore the fact that Leah still has lesbian desires. In fact, Leah dreams about the possibility of running away with Shar so that they can become "outlaws" (86). Leah seems to be unable to voice her desires, to express what was and is still there. The narrative offers some answers to this riddle, but concentrates more explicitly on Leah's confrontation with motherhood.

Leah is being constantly pressured to become a mother by her own mother, Pauline, and her husband. She is equally pressured by her female colleagues. When being with them, Leah tries to behave as "normal women do" (38). But Leah rejects this image of "normal woman", whereby woman is understood as an essentialist category, and the "institution of motherhood as compulsory for women" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 92). After finding out that she is pregnant, she has her third abortion. She equates becoming a mother to being mature and definite, and thus connects motherhood to the passing of time and death. Moreover, Leah's concerns over reproduction do not end with the abortion. She agrees with her husband to have children. As has just been mentioned, for Leah, having children is only a movement towards death. Consequently, she starts taking the contraceptive pill in secret. Julia Kristeva understands the maternal body in terms of abjection, "as the site of the origin of life and consequently also of the insertion into mortality and death . . . . as both sacred and soiled, holy and hellish; it is attractive and repulsive, all powerful and therefore impossible to live with" (qtd in Braidotti 93). In addition, Nancy Chodorow corroborates that those "behaviors that sabotage fertility and pregnancy . . . meet up with an unconscious belief and commitment with time standing still" (103). Leah's wish for stillness seems to be quite conscious. Leah's rejection of

motherhood may also be analysed as submerged in “fears of losing oneself and one’s identity,” as Chodorow puts it. (110). However, what aspects of her identity Leah wants to preserve are not clear in the novel. The narrator nevertheless expresses Leah’s discomfort with the idea of achieving an apparently fixed identity against her perceived state of endless “becoming” (74). Leah’s contradictory attitude in her simultaneous search for stillness and state of becoming, as well as her rejection of the discursive imposition of motherhood, may become the sediments for a potential rejection of those discourses and behaviours which are the effect of hegemonic institutions. Be that as it may, the fact that Leah masks both her sexuality and her non-desire of motherhood excludes any defiance. Yet, Leah’s narrative lays bare the persistence of essentialism and the repression of homosexual desires in favour of compulsory heterosexuality.

When describing the abortion episode, the narrator comments how Leah “is ashamed before an imagined nobody who isn’t real and yet monitors our thoughts” and how “she reprimands herself” in an attempt to think “the sort of thing normal women think” (65-6). That “imagined nobody” could be identified with what Judith Butler defines as “normative phantasms” (*Bodies that Matter* 4). Leah is ashamed because she does not live up to the standards which have been set by those discourses which she has internalised. Leah does not fit into what is “normal” or, rather, heteronormative. In this section of the novel there is repeated emphasis on the fact that everybody says and does the same things in the same way. Globalization has brought sameness into our current multiverse, one which should have allegedly learnt to accept difference. Susan Hawthorne has explained that “systemic power tends toward the universal and toward the imposition of sameness, homogeneity, monopoly, monotony and monoculturalism” (68). Leah may have succumbed to some of the dictates of systemic power, but the narrative shows her awareness of those processes which aim towards sameness and, in turn, renders them as cultural and/or political constructions. The constructedness of these discourses will be further exposed in the case of Keisha and her metamorphosis into Natalie.

Contrary to Leah, Natalie D’Angelis, née Keisha Blake, does not seem to struggle with motherhood. Nevertheless, the narrator comments that she becomes a mother because she “had no intention of being made ridiculous by failing to do whatever was expected of her” (321). This is but one example of Natalie’s



attempts towards assimilation into hegemonic discourses. As a girl, Keisha could only dream about the freedom that having no roots could bring about. This potentially liberating idea, however, is subdued as Keisha falls victim to the confines of assimilation. As a teenager, she considers herself to be a forgery after realising that she is full of inconsistencies and contradictory attitudes, such as her recently awakened sexuality and its repression by religious morality. In a subsection entitled "Surplus value, schizophrenia, adolescence," Keisha recognizes her friend Layla as real in the mirror, but she recognizes herself only as forgery (221). This Lacanian moment of (mis)recognition will deepen Keisha's internal divisions and precipitate further "forgeries," while calling attention to a theory that works around images of wholeness and fragmentation.

When she is at university, Keisha seems to enter yet another symbolic realm, and it is then that she metamorphoses into Natalie, undergoing a deep process of "self-invention" (247). This process of self-invention is provoked by her professional and class ambitions and her need for acceptance within her university circle, where she can only conceive herself as a subject in her new identity as Natalie. Despite Natalie's efforts, the narrator implies that this process of self-invention does not and will not work. After having been at different universities for some time, Leah visits Natalie. When Leah is departing, she confesses to Natalie that "(she is) the only person (she) can be (her)self with." The narrator describes Natalie's pain because she has "no self to be, not with Leah, or anyone" (246). This selfless subject is not the result of a postmodern and poststructuralist conception of subjectivity. This selfless subject results 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. Therefore, the participation in such a system implies, in this case, the erasure of Natalie's origins and the construction of a new identity which is the result of performativity.

Judith Butler understands performativity as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names" (*Bodies that Matter* 2). Furthermore, she specifies that performativity is "not a singular act, for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (*Bodies*

*that Matter* 12). Butler applies performativity to gender in order to “show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an “internal” feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures” (*Gender Trouble* xv). As has been shown, *NW* shows the performativity that is implied in the very idea of motherhood. But the novel also makes reference to another key concept in Butler’s theory, that of drag.

Butler argued that drag “subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (*Gender Trouble* 174). Butler later on specified that drag is not inherently subversive per se, but that “drag is 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” (*Bodies that Matter* 125). In *NW*, drag is extended to categories other than gender. Section 170 of the “Host” chapter, entitled “In drag,” enumerates all of Natalie’s drags:

daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each 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 (333).

The metaphor of “drag” is used here not only for gender, but also for Natalie’s disguises in terms of class, nationality and the private/public divide, exposing them as constructions. The reference to the wardrobe is also explained by Butler in her argument that “we derive that knowledge from the clothes that the person wears, or how the clothes are worn. This is naturalized knowledge, even though it is based on a series of cultural inferences, some of which are highly erroneous” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xxii). Here, original gender and any other original identities attached to various “axes of differentiation” are parodied, and in turn rendered impossible.

The impossibility of encapsulating an original identity is further elaborated at the end of the novel, when it is revealed that

Natalie's greatest "drag" is in her old self. Her identity as Keisha has survived, and not only as a subconscious ego. Natalie has kept her old self and location within the working class environment of Willesden in her internet identity as "Keisha NW," which she uses for listings that offer sexual encounters. The internet offers Natalie the possibility of keeping Keisha alive, even if the subject she creates is practically a caricature of her old self. Although it may seem that this possibility allows her to be both Natalie and Keisha, lawyer and hairdresser, higher and lower class, the narrative reveals that she continues to have no self to be. When her husband, Frank, discovers her life as Keisha NW, he asks if it is fiction. The problem is that, not only Keisha, but also Natalie, are fictions. At the end of the novel, she is said to have "no name, no biography, no characteristics." (360). She goes as far as admitting that "there was some relief in becoming an object" (363). Therefore, she has no self and, consequently, no origin. Irigaray's idea of miming should be considered here, since her idea of miming "has the effect of repeating the origin only to displace the origin as an origin" (qtd. in Butler, *Bodies that matter* 45). Despite the criticism of the notion of an origin or an original, the split identity that is here developed and the desire to become an object should also be read as the effect of power. bell hooks argued that one becomes a subject when "one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one's own life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness, as one invents new, alternative habits of being" (15). Similarly, Judith Butler has argued that "the normative force of performativity—its power to establish what qualifies as "being"—works not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well" (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 188). Thus, one can only wonder if Keisha has ever stopped being an object. Keisha has been trying to become a subject by imposing on herself various identities which do not celebrate difference within female subjectivity nor offer a new way of being. The identities she adopts are based on set discourses, which leave little or no space for alteration or subversiveness. Natalie's drag is not the result of a subversive agenda, but rather of camouflage. After an encounter with Nathan, an old school friend, who has addiction problems and still belongs to the underclass, she clings to her Natalie identity again, due to her "strong instinct for self-defence, self-preservation" (399), thus making it clear that, in this new survival of the fittest, her identity as Natalie is the only way out for her.

### Conclusion

Judith Butler argues that “social discourse wields the power to form and regulate a subject through the imposition of its own terms. Those terms, however, are not simply accepted or internalized; they become psychic only through the movement by which they are dissimulated” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 197). Hegemonic power has managed to become naturalized in many instances and its dissimulation should always be suspected and questioned. I would argue that *NW* questions it in the narration of Leah and Keisha’s identity formation. *NW* shows the interconnection between the axes of differentiation that make up female subjectivity and reflects on the understanding of the subject as multiple. The persistent influence of patriarchal and colonizing attitudes portrayed in the novel results in subjects who are torn apart, rather than considered multiple. The existence of a unified and authentic female subjectivity, or any subjectivity for that matter, is also questioned. Those who search for an authentic identity usually fall prey to hegemonic discourses, whose ultimate aim is to impose sameness and diminish the potentially dangerous role of those subjects on the margins, those who are still regarded as “Other.”

Zadie Smith presents a multiverse in which characters, and the female protagonists in particular, are driven into sameness. The novel raises awareness of the constructedness of contemporary identities and the performativity that they imply, thus making Butler’s use of the metaphor of drag suitable to explain the different identities that each person adopts in varying contexts. The notion of origin and an original identity are thus parodied in the novel, but *NW* also shows the impossibility of being caught in between different constructed subjectivities. Drag should display its subversive potential, but those who seek subversion need to be able to raise their voices, to become politicised, in order to provide a stronger critique of the hegemonic power of a society which still favours assimilation and therefore is unable to recognize the constructedness of its allegedly natural discourses.

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