

THE PROBLEM OF SETTING IN THE NOVEL "NW" BY ZADIE SMITH

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**Annotation.** *This article analyzes "NW", a novel by Zadie Smith, one of the prominent representatives of contemporary English literature. In the novel, the urban space of northwest London is depicted not only as the setting where events unfold, but also as a crucial factor that shapes the characters' social, cultural, and psychological states. The article examines the sociological, psychological, and postcolonial interpretations of setting, revealing the complex relationship between place and identity in "NW."*

**Keywords:** *setting, urbanism, identity, postcolonialism, London, contemporary English literature.*

**Annotatsiya.** *Ushbu maqolada zamonaviy ingliz adabiyotining yorqin vakillaridan biri Zedi Smitning "NW" romani tahlil qilinadi. Asarda London shahrining shimoli-g'arbiy qismidagi urbanistik makon nafaqat voqealar kechadigan joy sifatida, balki personajlarning ijtimoiy, madaniy va ruhiy holatini belgilovchi muhim omil sifatida namoyon bo'ladi. Maqolada makonning sotsiologik, psixologik va postkolonial talqinlari tahlil qilinib, "NW" romanida joy va identifikatsiya o'rtasidagi murakkab munosabat ochib beriladi.*

**Kalit so'zlar:** *makon, urbanizm, identifikatsiya, postkolonializm, London, zamonaviy ingliz adabiyoti.*

**Аннотация.** *В данной статье анализируется роман Зэди Смит «NW», одной из ярких представительниц современной английской литературы. В произведении урбанистическое пространство северо-западного Лондона представлено не только как место действия, но и как важный фактор, определяющий социальное, культурное и психологическое состояние персонажей. В статье рассматриваются социологические, психологические и постколониальные интерпретации пространства, раскрывается сложная взаимосвязь между местом и идентичностью в романе «NW».*

**Ключевые слова:** *пространство, урбанизм, идентичность, постколониализм, Лондон, современная английская литература.*

**Introduction.** Zadie Smith's literary works stand out in contemporary English literature for their unique exploration of multicultural society, migration, race, class, and identity. Her novels like *White Teeth*, *On Beauty*, and *NW* reflect the multilayered social life of the United Kingdom. In particular, *NW* vividly portrays the distinct landscape of London, revealing the profound role of setting in shaping personal and social identity.

The title “NW” — an abbreviation for “North West London” — represents not only a geographical location but also a symbolic space filled with class divisions, racial hierarchies, and personal quests. Thus, in the novel, space functions not merely as a physical setting but as a dynamic field where social and psychological forces intersect.

**Research Methods.** In this article, several contemporary literary methods are used to study the problem of setting in Zadie Smith’s NW. Using the sociological method of analysis, the urban space of London is examined in terms of class divisions and cultural conflicts. The spatial dimension in NW is interpreted as a mirror reflecting the social structure of city life. Through the characters of Natalie and Leah, the relationship between class transformation, social mobility and identity is explored.

Through cultural analysis, the setting in NW is examined as a system of social signs connected to urban culture — including lifestyle, language, race, fashion, and consumption patterns. The different districts of London — Caldwell, Kilburn, and Willesden — are distinguished from one another based on specific socio-cultural codes.

### **Results and Discussion.**

**The Function of Setting in the Novel.** Zadie Smith’s NW places the concept of setting at the very center of its narrative. The title “NW”—an abbreviation for “North-West London”—denotes not only a geographical location but also a social, economic, cultural, and psychological territory. The author presents this space as a post-industrial city marked by class divisions and social fragmentation.

The novel explores different layers of urban space through its four main characters—Leah, Natalie, Felix, and Nathan—all of whom originate from the same housing estate, Caldwell. Over time, their lives diverge: some climb the social ladder, while others fall into decline. In this way, Smith transforms setting into a measure of social mobility—a metaphorical map of opportunities and limitations within contemporary society.

Caldwell is repeatedly described as the “center of poverty” in the novel. Through this depiction, Smith critiques the urban crisis in Britain, the politics of social segregation, and the state’s indifference toward the lower classes. Even when Natalie and Leah achieve personal success, the “spirit” of Caldwell continues to haunt them. Thus, setting persists in their consciousness as a form of social trauma.

Smith portrays London as a living organism—one that breathes, transforms, absorbs, and expels its inhabitants. The city’s physical structure—its streets, neighborhoods, and transport systems—serves as an external manifestation of human psychology. For instance, Leah’s habit of wandering through the Underground reflects her subconscious sense of being lost within the labyrinth of her own life. Natalie, on the other hand, tries to situate herself on the city map, yet the notion of “home” becomes increasingly abstract for her.

Through these spatial metaphors, Zadie Smith turns London into a psychogeographic landscape, where urban space mirrors the characters’ fragmented identities and emotional dislocation in a multicultural, postmodern city.

**The Problem of Setting in the Postcolonial Context.** Continuing the traditions of postcolonial literature, Zadie Smith interprets the urban space of London in NW through the lens of imperial legacy and multicultural encounters. Most of the novel's characters are descendants of families originating from the Caribbean, Africa, or Asia. Although they live in the "center" of Britain, they still experience a profound sense of alienation and displacement.

In this regard, the city becomes a twofold symbol:

1. Center — representing opportunity, modernity, education, and success.
2. Outside — embodying social instability, racism, and a persistent feeling of otherness.

Throughout their lives, Natalie and Leah constantly move between these two settings. The closer they get to the geographical and social "center" of London, the further they drift from their cultural and emotional roots. This dual movement illustrates how postcolonial subjects inhabit an in-between space — neither fully integrated into the dominant culture nor entirely detached from their origins.

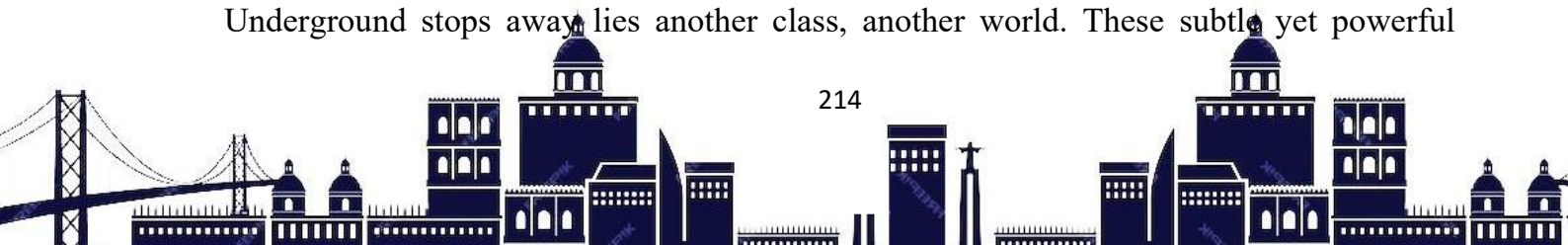
Through this tension, Zadie Smith exposes the complex boundaries between the metropolis and the marginalized, showing how colonial hierarchies and class divisions continue to shape urban identities in postcolonial Britain. The city in NW thus becomes a site where the echoes of empire persist — a landscape of both inclusion and exclusion, belonging and estrangement.

**Urban Setting and the Psychological State of the Individual.** In NW, Zadie Smith uses the topography of London as a model of the class system. Every location in the novel symbolizes a particular social status. Caldwell represents poverty and limited opportunity; Willesden signifies a transitional zone—reflecting the desire to rise from the lower to the middle class; while Kensal Rise and Kilburn High Road embody transformation.

Natalie becomes the embodiment of the dream of class mobility. Coming from a poor background, she achieves upward social movement through education. Yet Smith questions this apparent success. Natalie's new environment—her luxurious home, prestigious job, and wealthy husband—fails to provide her with a true sense of belonging. She becomes detached from her roots, her neighborhood, and her cultural memory. Thus, Smith portrays the so-called "space of success" as, in fact, a site of inner emptiness.

The Leaning House, as well as the characters' movements through narrow streets, underground tunnels, and shopping centers, serve as allegories of the city's social system. London's concrete walls and hidden boundaries divide people, both physically and psychologically. Smith's approach aligns with postmodern urbanism, which views the city not as a structured system but as a psychological labyrinth—a complex network of disorientation and emotional fragmentation.

In Smith's depiction, the map of London is filled with invisible borders. Just a few Underground stops away lies another class, another world. These subtle yet powerful



divisions shape the characters' inner lives: they feel alien in their own city and ashamed of their origins in their former neighborhoods. Through this, Smith expresses the fragmented nature of identity in modern metropolitan life, where setting mirrors the disconnection and instability of the postmodern self.

**Setting and the Problem of Social Class.** In *NW*, Zadie Smith uses urban setting to expose the realities of social stratification. Although Natalie moves to a wealthier district, internally she remains bound to Caldwell. Through this, Smith critiques the myth of "freedom through success," suggesting that changing one's physical location does not necessarily free one from socio-cultural roots or inherited class identity.

In the novel, setting functions as a marker of the social system. The map of London becomes a metaphorical document that reflects the city's hierarchy, power relations, and boundaries of opportunity. Each area visually embodies a different social condition, turning geography into a visible manifestation of inequality.

Through this spatial symbolism, Smith reveals how urban landscapes perpetuate class distinctions—how streets, neighborhoods, and even postal codes silently encode privilege and exclusion. Thus, in *NW*, space is not neutral; it becomes a text of class, a terrain where mobility is limited, and where identity remains inseparable from one's social origins.

**Conclusion.** Zadie Smith's *NW* offers a profound exploration of the literary and philosophical dimensions of setting. In the novel, London is not merely a setting but a complex social model that discusses issues of identity, class, race and gender. By portraying the city as a living organism, Smith illustrates each individual's struggle to find their place within its intricate structure.

The term "NW" goes far beyond its geographical meaning; it signifies the boundaries between classes, races, and cultures. North-West London becomes a part of contemporary British society, where diverse social and ethnic groups coexist within the same area yet lead parallel lives that rarely intersect. Consequently, setting functions as a metaphor for social division throughout the novel.

For Zadie Smith, space represents a philosophical category—it expresses a person's social position, psychological balance, and historical roots. Through the depiction of urban setting, the author raises essential existential questions: "Who am I?", "Where am I?", and "Where do I belong?" The city, in this sense, becomes both a site of self-discovery and a realm of alienation—a place where one constantly searches for identity yet repeatedly drifts away from it.

In conclusion, in *NW*, space serves as both a source of conflict and the starting point of self-awareness. The characters' attempts to escape their geographical origins reveal an inescapable truth: they cannot run from their histories or roots. With remarkable insight, Zadie Smith captures the psychological and social complexity of urban life, presenting setting as an inseparable part of modern human destiny.

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