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Pedagogická fakulta  
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BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Identita ve vztahu k etice a dilematu jednání a struktury v románu *NW* od  
Zadie Smith

Identity with Reference to Ethics and Dilemma of Agency and Structure in  
Zadie Smith's *NW*  
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Studijní program: Specializace v pedagogice

Studijní obor: B AJ-FJ

### **Prohlášení**

Odevzdáním této bakalářské práce na téma Identity with Reference to Ethics and Dilemma of Agency and Structure in Zadie Smith's *NW* prohlašuji, že jsem ji vypracovala pod vedením vedoucího práce samostatně za použití v práci uvedených pramenů a literatury. Dále potvrzuji, že tato práce nebyla využita k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tématem bakalářské práce je zobrazení krize identity v románu *NW* významné současné britské autorky Zadie Smith. Toto významné téma multikulturní literatury je nahlíženo z několika různých perspektiv s ohledem na narativní a obsahovou mnohovrstevnatost díla. Hledání sebe sama je chápáno nejen jako individuální boj jednotlivce, ale rovněž coby širší společenský problém doby. Práce se tak dotýká jednak problematiky postmoderní etiky a etického rozměru díla, jednak dilematu mezi svobodnou možností aktérů ovlivnit své jednání a mírou determinace ze strany struktury, jejíž součástí tito aktéři jsou. Text se skládá ze dvou hlavních částí, teoretické a praktické. Teoretická část staví na teoriích sociologů Zygmunta Baumana a Anthonyho Giddense. V prvním případě se bakalářská práce soustředí na Baumanovy poznatky v oblasti formování jednotlivcovy identity a jejich proměn v postmoderních podmínkách. S odkazem na Giddensovu teorii strukturace a tzv. reflexivního projektu self text zkoumá, jak při utváření vlastní identity jednotlivci interagují s vyššími strukturálními celky. Praktická část zrcadlí teoretickou a aplikuje teoretické znalosti na analýzu vybraného materiálu. Děje se tak ve dvou rovinách – nejprve v kontextu struktury díla a narativních technik, které ilustrují současnou identitární krizi, již jednotlivci čelí, a poté s ohledem na hlavní postavy knihy. Na jejich příkladu práce demonstruje, jak se klasifikace postmoderní identity podle Baumana projevuje v současných podmínkách a jak se při formování identity střetává individuální aktérství se strukturálními vlivy.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

identita, etika, struktura, jednání, postmodernita

## **ABSTRACT**

The thesis explores the issue of identity crisis in Zadie Smith's *NW*. This significant theme of multicultural literature is studied from different points of view in relation to narrative and thematic variety of the novel. The quest for identity is seen not only as a struggle of an individual, but also as a general societal problem of contemporary era. Consequently, the thesis cannot avoid the problematics of postmodern ethics. It deals with the ethical dimension of the work as well as the dilemma of protagonists' chance to be in control of their action and the degree of determination by the structure, i.e. the society in which those individuals participate. The text consists of two main parts, the theoretical and the practical one. The theoretical part builds on the theories proposed by sociologists Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens. In the first case, the bachelor thesis focuses on Bauman's findings in the field of the formation of individual identity and its redefinitions under postmodern circumstances. Referring to Giddens's theory of structuration and the reflexive project of the self, it examines how individuals interact with higher structural units when forming their own identities. The practical part mirrors the theoretical one and applies the theoretical knowledge to the analysis of the selected material. Firstly, it is done with regards to the structure of the work and the used narrative techniques that illustrate the current identity crisis which individuals have to cope with. Secondly, in connection to the *NW* novel's characters, it explores how Bauman's classification of postmodern identity types is manifested in contemporary conditions, and how individual actors interact with structural influences during the identity formation process.

## **KEYWORDS**

identity, ethics, structure, agency, postmodernity

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## 1 Introduction

Multiculturalism is a term rooted in Western societies public discourse for several last decades. Nowadays, due to the processes such as mass migration and other political, demographic and environmental changes namely in the European neighbourhood, multiculturalism has become even more prominent and widely discussed. The term itself is highly complicated, with various connotations and definitions depending on the scholarly field in which it is used. Within the realm of British literature, it is a heterogeneous category including postcolonial and diaspora literature, works written by hyphenated authors and writers of different than colonial or postcolonial ancestry. As the list of subcategories suggests, multiculturalism is a phenomenon formed historically. However, the subject matter of this Bachelor's thesis is not the origin of multicultural era, it is a reflection of its consequences in a particular literary work, *NW* (2012) by Zadie Smith.

Much has been written on Smith's début, *White Teeth* (2000), which "through its complex plot, its diverse range of characters, its broad post-war historical sweep, and its insistent and summative portrayal of a de facto hybrid cultural life, is artfully constructed as the definitive representation of twentieth-century British multiculturalism" (Head 106). *NW* is certainly a novel of a different kind, in the sense that it is not a grand epic narrative. Actually, it focuses rather on personal microcosms of the four main characters and invites the reader look deeply into their inner lives. More attention is given to their personal contemplations which, of course, are noteworthy reflections about the world and the society as well. In comparison with *White Teeth*, it is not possible to detect any complex plot here or vibrant characters with an elaborated description of their historical background. However, the value of the novel in the context of knowledge about contemporary British society and its citizens is indisputable. What Head wrote on Smith's first novel is without any doubt true for *NW* as well: "[...] it presents the social problems of ethnicity as the shared problems of a diverse citizenship with a common 'home'" (108). Moreover, *NW* goes far beyond as it also investigates the psychological level of multicultural phenomena and impacts of the existence within the multicultural society.

"The contemporary cultural landscape is an amalgam of crosscultural influences, blended, patch-worked, and layered upon one another. Unbound and fluid, culture is hybrid and

interstitial, moving between spaces of meaning,” argued Haj Yazdih (31), American professor of sociology, and continued: “This hybridity is woven into every corner of society, from trendy fusion cuisine to Caribbean rhythms in pop music to the hyphenated identities that signify ethnic Americans, illuminating the lived experience of ties to a dominant culture blending with the cultural codes of a Third World culture.” (31) With regards to culture, language, race or nation, the society is witnessing the co-existence or fusion of various influences together, a process sometimes resulting in completely new forms, sometimes leaving individuals (or groups of them) uncertain in the process of transition. In the field of the self-definition, human beings have to deal with various forms of identity and the resulting crisis in many aspects of their existence. Furthermore, the contemporary society life is characterized by high level of insecurity and instability, clear rules and norms being less definite than before or erased completely.

Identity crisis analysis, the very topic of this thesis, is a sovereign discipline within the field of multicultural literature, being present both in literary works and texts on them. Even though much has been said and written on the matter, it does not discourage us from addressing the problem again under different circumstances as it is a highly significant issue. In this thesis, identity crisis is analysed with reference to postmodern ethics and dilemma of structure and agency for several reasons. Firstly, Zadie Smith’s notions on the novel “are inextricably bound up with a contemplation of both ethics and aesthetics” (Tolan 140). The author expressed herself in a similar manner when claiming that “it seems that if you put people on paper and move them through time, you cannot help but talk about ethics” (Smith, *Love, Actually*). Thus, it was the character of the work itself that provided us with the theme. Secondly, identity crisis is not a marginal issue. It has become a complex social problem, affecting the society as a whole. Smith’s works are often discussed in the context of hysterical realism which “had, by the early 2000s, become one of, if not the, dominant mode in British and American fiction” (Derbyshire). Since we think about identity as not only a personal matter, such a classification also justifies the choice of the topic. Hysterical realism fiction provides us with an investigation into particular social phenomena while the characters are often mere personifications of those. Nevertheless, “Zadie Smith was one of the first to be labelled a hysterical realist and, fittingly, she was also one of the first to rebel against its growing orthodoxies. [...] Smith’s

latest—*NW*—satisfies, in many ways this need for a more sociological and also more experimental realism” (Marcus 68–69). Nevertheless, *NW* is still suitable for the goals of this thesis as it investigates major social phenomena of these days.

The work consists of two main sections. The theoretical part introduces the identity crisis issue in the context of multicultural literature and social conditions under which this phenomenon occurs, namely with the emphasis on the post-war developments and the rise of the postmodern era. The introduction is followed by the characteristics of the present-day identity types that are typical for urban environments, *NW* intrinsically being an example of urban literature. The characteristics is based on Zygmunt Bauman’s works as it is him who proposed the most appropriate theory for this context. The text proceeds to dilemma of agency and structure, referring to Anthony Giddens’s theory of structuration and reflexive project of the self which aptly illustrate the process of identity forming in the present days. The practical part applies the theoretical sum of knowledge to the selected piece of literature, Zadie Smith’s *NW*. The application is proposed in two ways, firstly in terms of the novel’s structure and secondly in terms of the four main protagonists.

## 2 Theoretical Part

### 2.1 *NW* – Context of the Novel

Following *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man* (2002) and *On Beauty* (2005), *NW* is the fourth novel published by a successful British author Zadie Smith. Within the work readers can observe a shift away from hysterical realism to which the author used to be generally linked. Therefore, it is no surprise that Smith received critical acclaim for *NW* even from those who criticised her inclination towards the mentioned literary movement.

It is an even more intensely English novel than “White Teeth”—one character is described as having an accent “somewhere between the Queen and the speaking clock” (in the old days you were able to find out the time by phoning a number, to hear a very proper, real but slightly unreal female voice, constantly updating herself)—and a better one, the best novel she has yet written. (Wood, *Books of the Year*)

It was actually James Wood, an English literary critic, who coined the term hysterical realism for the first time in a 2000 essay *Human, All Too Inhuman*. He did so in reaction to several British and American authors such as Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace and Zadie Smith. What Wood disliked about the fiction of that time can be easily summed up by the essay title or in a following sentence that appeared a year later in a *Guardian* article *Tell me how does it feel?*: “The result - in America at least - is novels of immense self-consciousness with no selves in them at all, curiously arrested and very “brilliant” books that know a thousand things but do not know a single human being.” Wood expressed regret about fiction that is rather a probe exploring how the world works than how it is perceived and felt by individuals. In that sense, *NW* must have certainly satisfied Wood’s call for novels of a different kind.

Telling the stories of four characters living in North West London – Leah, Natalie (originally Keisha), Felix and Nathan – *NW* puts an emphasis on characters’ personal experience. At the same time, through the individuals’ conditions, interactions with the world, relationships and lives, Smith gives readers a thoughtful account of the present-day society’s climate and state of affairs. However, it is not only the themes but also narrative techniques, experimental form of the novel and the overall style what makes *NW* so illustrative and relevant for the contemporary era and this Bachelor’s thesis as well.

As far as the author is concerned, Zadie Smith was born in 1975 as a child of a British father and a Jamaican mother who had emigrated to England six years earlier. During the studies of English at Cambridge, she finished her debut novel *White Teeth*, an awards winning best-seller praised both by experts and readers. Three years after the success, Smith was nominated as one of 20 'Best of Young British Novelists' by Granta magazine. She is also the winner of 2006 Orange Prize for Fiction for *On Beauty*. After teaching fiction seminars at Columbia University School of the Arts, Zadie Smith became a tenured professor at New York University in 2010. In 2013 *NW* was listed for Women's Prize for Fiction. Besides, it has received positive reviews by critics, confirming Zadie Smith's status as one of the most talented and influential authors of contemporary British literature. In 2017, her latest novel *Swing Time* (2016) was long-listed for the prestigious Man Booker Prize. *White Teeth* also appeared on *Time's List of the 100 Best Novels* in English since 1923.

Smith's major themes and concerns are both personal and national identity, its development and changes in the light of multicultural ideology, and redefinition of the concept of Englishness.

## **2.2 Identity and Multicultural Literature**

The logic of the discourse of identity assumes a stable subject, i.e., we've assumed that there is something which we can call our identity which, in a rapidly shifting world, has the great advantage of staying still. Identities are a kind of guarantee that the world isn't falling apart quite as rapidly as it sometimes seems to be. It's a kind of fixed point of thought and being, a ground of action, a still point in the turning world. That's the kind of ultimate guarantee that identity seems to provide us with. (Hall 10)

This Stuart Hall's quotation is significant for a traditional approach towards identity. For centuries, it was regarded as a stable, unchanging category that defined an individual's place in the world. The identity used to be formed by various external factors such as person's nationality, position within social hierarchy or affiliation with a larger social, local, ethnical or religious unit. Nevertheless, due to the revolutionary changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely after the Second World War when the society entered the postmodern era,

explanations of many categories, once clear, have been undergoing a perpetual process of revision and redefinition.

Democratization, pluralization and relativization are the three main concepts that characterize postmodernism, each of them representing social progress and positive changes. However, all of them produced also certain negative phenomena. In the field of identity, insecurity and lost confidence in one's self are among these disturbing results. The present-day globalised world, its interconnectedness and mutual dependency of points both in time and space as well as unclear boundaries between the local and the distant, diminishing importance of nation states, an omnipresent mixture of various influences in almost all the fields of human experience, this all creates a constant degree of entropy<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, the notion of identity as well as concrete personal identities needed (and continuously need) to be reconsidered.

In line with postmodern thought, postcolonial theory fully subscribes to the new identity discourse by acknowledging the destabilisation and the fragmentation affecting the concept of identity. The destabilisation of the concept of identity stems from the growing awareness that identity is a question involving the relationship of the self and the other. Without the other, there would be no self, no identity. The contemporary concern with otherness highlights the proposition that alterity (difference or the existence of the other) determines the process of identification. It is the existence of the other that gives the self meaning. Besides, the self is not a finished product; it is not a stable construct; it is, rather, a process in constant flux; something that is incessantly shifting. (Karkaba 93)

Therefore, identity is not a state into which humans are born or which is being established within the first years of life. It is a category that constantly reacts and tries to adapt to both the external environment, conditions or events, and internal developments or an individual's current situation. However, this on-going "differentiation" (Karkaba 93) and definition of the self give rise to an incessant inner tension and never fully resolved problems of doubt, uncertainty and crisis which represent one of the leading themes in multicultural literature. Actually, characters in these works often experience uprootedness,

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<sup>1</sup> Entropy is a lack of order or predictability (Oxford Dictionaries). On the one hand, it implies a certain degree of disorder. On the other hand, due to entropy a change is more likely to happen, which might be perceived both positively and negatively. The former because it results in a higher degree of mobility, the latter because it produces the effect of instability and uncertainty. This issue and its relation to the identity will be discussed later in the text.

not truly belonging to anywhere or, on the contrary, to more categories simultaneously. Their personality always remains incomplete, the characters find themselves permanently somewhere in transition. That is why liminality together with the above mentioned hybridity are two key concepts through which identity in such works can be analysed.

Identity cannot be restricted to only one particular thing; instead of being enclosed within the boundaries of particularism, identity opens out to embrace pluralism.

Pluralistic identity is a notion that calls for Homi Bhabha's treatment of the concept of hybridity; such a concept is inescapably intertwined with the notion of ambivalence and indeterminacy. The indeterminacy and ambivalence of identity, the fluctuation between sameness and difference, spring from the inadequacy of any attempt to adopt only one particular identity. The inherent diversity of the self, places identity in an in-between interval, a third space, for Homi Bhabha who, in adopting a politics of the in-between, opens the scope for investigation into the fertile interstitial space of identity. (Karkaba 93)

The above-mentioned fluctuation and pluralism typical for the present-day identity result in individuals finding themselves sometimes in the space between. The transitions between plural identities might remain unfinished, leaving the individual in the middle of the identity formation occupying the space between two separate categories.

### **2.3 Identity with Reference to Postmodern Ethics**

Nowadays, one's identity is rather a matter of choice than something given. If we admit that human beings are partly responsible for who and what they are, we should also consider that an individual exists in particular social conditions and is involved in a number of social interactions. A question arises on how the relation between the individual's agency and determination by the structure looks like, how the process functions and what are its rules. Here a reference to ethics can be found since if we consider one's identity to be a result of choices, individuals have to make decisions that consequently form their actions. However, what is the compass that navigates a human on the route full of many possibilities? What are the principles that govern this procedure?

The problem is that clear patterns of behaviour, norms of what is and what is not possible have collapsed with the arrival of postmodernity. According to Zygmunt Bauman, the most

distinctive characteristics of postmodern being is “the absence of social structures that would define the framework of possible during a lifetime and, at the same time, would encourage and support a human to realise any of the possibilities” (*Úvahy* 33, as translated by Tereza Svobodová). In fact, true postmodern beings do not have any particular identity, they possess only its variations that defile in front of their eyes like pictures in a kaleidoscope (*Úvahy* 35). This temporariness and fragmentariness penetrate through every aspect of the postmodern life and differentiate it from the experience of our modern ancestors.

Comparing the modern versus postmodern course of life, Zygmunt Bauman uses the metaphor of pilgrimage to describe humans on their journey through the world. “Wherever the pilgrim may be now, it is not where he ought to be, and not where he dreams of being. [...] For the pilgrim, only streets make sense, not the houses – houses tempt one to rest and relax, to forget about the destination.” (*From Pilgrim to Tourist* 20) A pilgrim’s way of life is characterized by certainty, predictability and a set of definite goals to which individuals are heading. The way is marked out, its boundaries clearly visible. By contrast, in the postmodern era the life journey is not linear, it is atelic and discontinuous. It does not have a particular solid objective from the beginning to the end. Instead, it lacks consistency and cohesion that would provide it with a concrete sense. Due to the fragmentariness of postmodern life, Bauman claims that it is no longer possible to use pilgrimage as a metaphor for postmodern conditions and that one pattern cannot express sufficiently the diversity of the available ways of life (*Úvahy* 40). Therefore, he presents four mainstream identities that emerged as the consequence of the postmodern conditions – the stroller, the vagabond, the tourist and the player, which, however, can be all experienced simultaneously.

### **2.3.1 The Stroller**

Although born in modern times, the identity of the stroller became prominent in postmodernity. The stroller was a product of modern cities and its architecture, namely the arcades that connected different parts of the city. It enabled people who had enough time and financial resources to spend time exploring the streets, beginning at one point and

letting the labyrinth of roads, lanes and passages to navigate them. The anonymous stroller was going down the streets, not knowing exactly what he saw, but completely free to imagine and interpret the events independently on reality. However, his freedom resulted from ignorance and superficiality of the contact with the world, his independence being only imagined instead of truly experienced. (*Úvahy* 42)

In the postmodern era, with the rise of shopping malls, the stroller's identity became widely accessible. Nevertheless, the model has changed. Despite adjusting the external reality to the stroller's imagination and manipulating it, the strollers themselves become manipulated.

[...] shopping malls are the worlds made by the bespoke designers to the measure of the stroller. The sites of mis-meetings, of encounters guaranteed to be episodic, of the present prised off from the past and the future, of surfaces glossing over surfaces. In these worlds, every stroller may imagine himself to be a director, though all strollers are the objects of direction. That direction is, as their own used to be, unobtrusive and invisible (though, unlike theirs, seldom inconsequential), so that baits feel like desires, pressures like intentions, seduction like decision-making; in the shopping malls, in life as shopping-to-stroll and strolling-to-shop, dependence dissolves in freedom, and freedom seeks dependence. (*From Pilgrim to Tourist* 27)

In other words, the stroller is no longer a director of his own story. He becomes an actor and even a puppet of the present-day creators of human needs and desires – marketing experts in Bauman's view. Moreover, as Bauman remarks, due to the development and use of new communications technologies the representations of the reality offered to the stroller-consumer became standards and measures of reality: "Nothing is truly real, unless it was video-recorded." (*Úvahy* 45, as translated by Tereza Svobodová)

### **2.3.2 The Vagabond**

Modernity regarded vagabonds as people out of control whose life journey was unpredictable. The absence of a fixed plan threatened the stability and order of modern times. Contrary to the pilgrim, the vagabond has no precise destination or determination to achieve it. The vagabond is in a never-ending process, always on the way. Bearing in mind all the typical features of postmodernism mentioned above, it is no surprise that under

postmodern conditions the vagabond's identity got promoted from the periphery to one of the central modes of life.

Now there are few 'settled' places left. The 'forever settled' residents wake up to find the places (places in the land, places in society and places in life), to which they 'belong', no longer existing or no longer accommodating; neat streets turn mean, factories vanish together with jobs, skills no longer find buyers, knowledge turns into ignorance, professional experience becomes liability, secure networks of relations fall apart and foul the place with putrid waste.  
(*From Pilgrim to Tourist* 29)

In the same way as vagabonds keep changing places, the definition of who they are keeps updating. There is no place to call it a home – the vagabond is constantly uprooted and strange everywhere he goes.

### **2.3.3 The Tourist**

Naturally, the tourist shares several qualities with the vagabond. For example, he travels from place to place and is constantly on the move. Nevertheless, he always moves on purpose, which differentiates him from the vagabond. “The purpose is new experience; the tourist is a conscious and systematic seeker of experience, of a new and different experience, of the experience of difference and novelty - as the joys of the familiar wear off and cease to allure.” (*From Pilgrim to Tourist* 29) The tourist sets on safer paths, driven by his own free will and with more control over the journey. His world is rid of danger and fright, experiences are designed to amuse, please and excite (*From Pilgrim to Tourist* 30), to satisfy his aesthetic criteria. The tourist is a hunter of adventures, he seeks the uniqueness of moments that give him feelings of the amazing. His life is a mosaic composed of millions of extraordinary and exceptional pieces. The world is a hotel which guests keep going through while changing rooms and meeting other hotel guests. The value of the stay is measured by the amount of impressions and experiences that it generates.  
(*Úvahy* 52)

Another distinctive feature is that, contrary to the vagabond, the tourist has a home, one hotel room which represents a point of reference where it is possible to return at any time. “The problem is, though, that as life itself turns into an extended tourist escapade, as tourist

conduct becomes the mode of life and the tourist stance grows into the character, it is less and less clear which one of the visiting places is the home.” (*From Pilgrim to Tourist* 30) In addition, home can never be a place where the tourist could be satisfied – for this home is too calm a place. Given the tourist’s restlessness, home remains rather an idea, a future possibility, than a concrete material experience lived now and here with which the tourist could reconcile. (*Úvahy* 53)

### **2.3.4 The Player**

The player’s world is not governed by any natural regularities that could be described and classified. The play is unpredictable, its main principle being a risk. The player does not yield to any invariable and lasting rules given by the outer world, instead he is allowed to create his own. Moreover, these rules are unstable and it is possible to change them in time.

In every play, one can detect a stroke of luck – “when cards are stacked in one’s favour or wind helps the ball into the net. But the ‘stroke of luck’ (or misfortune, as it were) does not lend the world the toughness it conspicuously lacks; it only signals the limits of how far playing one’s cards right may go in making things certain, but shares in the no-necessity no-accident status of the player’s calculations” (*From Pilgrim to Tourist* 31). The luck is completely independent on the player who is unable to influence the destiny, his manoeuvring space being defined only by the cards he is handed. The mode of life is characterized by freedom from obligation since the game is not supposed to be taken seriously. The duration of each game is definite, which supports the fragmentariness and decomposition of time into brief inconsequent episodes. At the beginning of a new episode, the score is reset no matter what the previous results were. The only goal is success.

In the postmodern era, it is not possible to free from play, in contrast “the mark of postmodern adulthood is the willingness to embrace the game wholeheartedly, as children do” (*From Pilgrim to Tourist* 32). A general truth is that “in such a world not everything

can happen, but nothing must happen; only a little of what happens is irrevocable and irreparable” (*Úvahy* 56, as translated by Tereza Svobodová).

To summarize, the four above-mentioned identity types became dominant and typical for the present-day urban life, emerging as a consequence of postmodern conditions (see the introduction to chapter 2.3 for a further explanation). Nowadays they are a norm with regards to the number of humans who practice them (*Úvahy* 57). Individuals can widely profit from postmodern modes of life as they open the door to an endless number of possibilities and freedom of both will and choice. On the other hand, the general instability and typical features of postmodernity such as discontinuity and inconsequentiality represent serious malaises of the present-day society.

As has been noted earlier in the text, the four modes of life coexist, not denying one another even though there are differences between them. The problem is that humans can never fully sacrifice to only one particular identity type. To live entirely according one of the patterns means to give up all the opportunities that could be provided by the remaining modes. Consequently,

“there exists no choice that could result in complete satisfaction. [...] Postmodern humans are condemned to uncertainty, to a prevailing feeling of loss, enduring discontent with themselves. [...] They move among fragments of impressions and experiences that do not refer to each other and from which they try in vain to compose a meaningful picture of life with an objective and a direction towards it” (*Úvahy* 58, as translated by Tereza Svobodová).

Paradoxically, this constant inner tension results in a strong desire for indicators that could serve as a reliable compass for individuals on their journey through the world.

The connection with ethics is obvious – whereas in the past there existed a set of rules, norms and values that facilitated an individual’s decision-making process, in the postmodern era we have witnessed the erosion of such codes. The game keeps changing all the time and in the long term there is nothing to rely on. Although humans experience the unprecedented degree of personal freedom and possibilities to act according their will and taste, they remain extremely passive, paralyzed in space and time, not able to decide how to act.

## 2.4 Identity with Reference to Dilemma of Agency and Structure

Dilemma of agency and structure is a fundamental issue of sociological theories. Using various approaches, sociologists have been systematically trying to answer the question of which of the two is decisive for human behaviour and to resolve the conflict between individual autonomy and inevitable determination of the social systems that individuals inhabit.<sup>2</sup>

When speaking about agency, we have in mind the possibility and ability of individuals to act independently, according to their free will and personal choices. Structure (for the purpose of this text the social structure as we remain strictly within the field of social sciences) stands in the opposition to agency. It represents a set of supraindividual factors that limit the above-mentioned independent action and form human behaviour. Therefore, dilemma of agency and structure deals with the relationship between the society and the individuals that it is composed of. As the definitions imply, in this realm micro and macrolevels of human existence, subjectivity and objectivity, meet each other.

Throughout the history of sociology we can identify many approaches towards the issue. For example, functionalism and structuralism give primacy to the structure whereas ethnomethodology emphasizes the agent's role. Several sociologists also find the dominance of either structure or agency insufficient and their solution to the dilemma resides in the synthesis and complementariness of both elements. Such a theory is that of structuration developed by Anthony Giddens and proposed in his *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976), *Studies in Social and Political Theory* (1977), *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979) and *The Constitution of Society: outline of the theory of structuration* (1984).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of various sociological theories dealing with dilemma of agency and structure see the website of a special course dedicated to the topic: <http://tucnak.fsv.cuni.cz/~hajek/ModerniSgTeorie/dilema.htm>. The course is open at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague.

<sup>3</sup> Since this Bachelor's thesis is not written in the field of sociology and a sociological issue serves as a theoretical framework for literary phenomena, not as the centre of the investigation, we kept the theory of

Giddens criticizes the focus on micro or macro explanation of the dilemma and claims that structure and agency are neither separable, nor independent units. Instead he proposes a duality of both.

The theory of structuration is inspired by structural linguistics which understands language as a system of signs and norms that determine their use. Structural linguistics operates namely with two basic terms, *langue* and *parole*<sup>4</sup>, where the meaning of *langue* is the system described in the previous sentence and *parole* represents a concrete realization of such a system, a particular communication event. The point is that concrete realizations might differ from each other, two different individuals will never write the letter *a* in the completely same manner. However, for the purpose of mutual understanding, it is necessary not to diverge radically from the given form of the letter. Therefore, language users possess a certain degree of autonomy but, at the same time, they are obliged to follow the norms dictated by the language system. By consenting to act so they legitimize the system and through every language use they preserve its existence. In sociological theory, the relationship between agents and structure is similar:

When I utter a sentence I draw upon various syntactical rules (sedimented in my practical consciousness of the language) in order to do so. These structural features of the language are the medium whereby I generate the utterance. But in producing a syntactically correct utterance I simultaneously contribute to the reproduction of the language as a whole. [...] The importance of this relation between moment and totality for social theory can hardly be exaggerated, involving as it does a dialectic of presence and absence which ties the most minor or trivial forms of social action to structural properties of the overall society, and to the coalescence of institutions over long stretches of historical time. (Giddens, *Central Problems* 114)

From the theory of structuration point of view, structures provide a set of rules and resources from which agents proceed when acting. Through repeated social practices they keep reproducing social systems. Simultaneously, social practices constitute agents. Thus, structure or more precisely structural properties of social systems, are both resources and results of agents' social practices. "By the duality of structure I mean the essential

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structuration as well as the topic of dilemma of agency and structure to the essentials, focusing on the information relevant for the thesis. For more details on the theory of structuration see the works mentioned in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Structural linguistics also works with the term *langage* which represents the capacity to convey a meaning through language.

recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and 'exists' in the generating moments of this constitution.” (Giddens, *Central Problems* 5)

The process of agents' interactions within social systems through which the systems are being created and at the same time reproduced is structuration. Nevertheless, mere reproduction is not the only power attributed to the agents, they are able to transform social structures if they decide. Actually, it is a quality of structure itself that it enables a social change. At this point a parallel to linguistics can be found again to illustrate these specific structural properties: even though a language system consists of a limited set of signs, the user can create an unlimited number of new combinations employing those signs. Despite the clear rules, the system offers enough resources so that the final outcome can be a change of its own rules. The possibility of transformation, the power of making a difference, assumes reflexivity – agents reflexively monitor and assess the actions, human agents are informed (*knowledgeable* as Giddens puts it) about them.

The theory of structuration has significant implications for interactions between micro and macro levels of issues, for the local and the global. Giddens's approach assumes that decisions and actions made in the personal sphere have the power to affect levels surpassing the boundaries of an individual's lived experience. Such decisions and actions can, in fact, be taken consciously and with regard to the effects produced at the level higher than that of a micro/local/personal etc. unit (Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity* 221, 209–231). The interaction between agents and structure, between personal and extrapersonal, have also implications for the conception of the self and identity: “globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self“ and „processes of self-realisation influence global strategies“ (Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity* 214). In this context the term reflexivity is particularly noteworthy. The self is always reflexive in the sense that the individuals' notion of who they are is being continuously evaluated and revised (or at least humans possess the capacity to act so if they find it convenient).

A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with

others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self. (Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity* 54)

At this point, Giddens's notions of identity meet the observations made by Bauman (see the previous chapter). The present-day individuals dispose of an extensive range of choices and significant possibilities of identity mobility. Moreover, in the light of the quotation above, such practice is desirable if not even required. However, such practice also produces considerable side effects: instability, uncertainty, confusion, feelings of doubt. "What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour." (Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity* 70)

In the last more than half a century humans have witnessed the unfastening of uncompromising social norms as well as disintegration of a common social narrative where roles performed by every particular individual were strictly established. Naturally, the process has been connected to an increased degree of liberty together with the emphasis on personal will and free choices. Nevertheless, as we have explained, the choice is not always completely free and under individuals' control. Instead there are higher and more complicated structures that also enter the field. What are the consequences, how are they reflected in literature and what evidence does literature give us of the society we live in? This is the task of the practical part to demonstrate.

### **3 Practical Part**

Zadie Smith's *NW* is definitely not a grand epic narrative with a complex, elaborate plot where readers could detect a clear storyline. And yet, even though almost nothing happens on more than the three hundred pages, the book gives a telling account of today's humans and society.

The novel inspects conditions of four characters – Leah Hanwell, Felix Cooper, Natalie (Keisha) Blake and Nathan Bogle – in a particular place and time, under circumstances that differ at first sight, but that are strikingly identical when examined carefully. Actually, all the characters embody the same social and psychological issues, and all of them tell the same story from their own point of view, which provides the text with a valuable polyphonic dimension. The novel's structure is complicated, characterised by both formal and content richness, this all connected by a common denominator that might be best formulated as follows: "It is a novel about identity crisis, and it is a novel with an identity crisis" (Franklin). There is not any other observation that could express the overall idea of the novel more aptly than this sentence. The questions of *who are you, who am I, who are those people* and modifications of such enquiries appear more or less explicitly in various contexts and situations throughout the text as well as in its readers' minds.

The practical part of this Bachelor's thesis demonstrates how the issue of identity crisis is approached in Zadie Smith's *NW*, what its reference to postmodern ethics is and how the individual agents interact with higher social structures when negotiating their identities. Firstly, the text explores how the overall structure and style of the novel illustrate the subject matter. Secondly, it focuses on the four main characters, their quest for identity, consequences of the crisis for their everyday lives and relationships, and common features with the four postmodern identity types described in the theoretical part.

#### **3.1 *NW* – Structure of the Novel, Narrative Techniques and Identity**

It was claimed in the theoretical part that *NW* integrates elements of both social and experimental realism. The structure of the novel and Smith's narrative style represent the most appropriate elements to demonstrate the latter. The novel is divided into five parts

that vary in terms of length, structure and narration. Each of them is devoted to one of the character with a single exception as there is no separate part exclusively focused on Nathan Bogle.

The book opens up with the part titled “Visitation” where Leah Hanwell is introduced for the first time. It consists of short chapters marked with numbers in chronological order, only four times interrupted by number 37<sup>5</sup>. In this part, the author often ignores the grammatical and syntactical conventions of English language, phrases sometimes being only court elliptical fragments, verbs or punctuation omitted and the text demanding for a reader to comprehend. The same observations apply to use of language that is illustrative for persons’ social background – verbs are contracted (*How come you ain’t at work?*, NW 12), speech is colloquial and even vulgar (*silly fat bitch*, NW 13), characters’ pronunciation digresses from the standard (*innit*, NW 14, *Bus. I spose. I dunno.*, NW 70). Smith’s style can be regarded as experimental here as the text is not always divided into sentences and paragraphs. It takes a form of a tree or a mouth with a tongue when the main protagonist is thinking about one, the author referring to the literary experiments of 1920s and 1930s avantgarde. This, actually, is not the only reference to modernist writers since the narration strongly resembles stream of consciousness, often used at that time:

The fat sun stalls by the phone masts. Anti-climb paint turns sulphurous on school gates and lamp posts. In Willesden people go barefoot, the streets turn European, there is a mania for eating outside. She keeps to the shade. Redheaded. On the radio: I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me. A good line – write it out on the back of a magazine. In a hammock, in the garden of a basement flat. Fenced in, on all sides.

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<sup>5</sup> Christian Lorentzen offers several interpretations of the number in *NW*. We decided to mention them in a footnote as they are not relevant to the central issues explored by this thesis: “Four chapters numbered 37 detail Leah’s memory of a female lover who thought the number 37 was ‘magical’, brought to mind as Leah looks in the window of 37 Ridley Avenue (this on page 37); an abortion Leah had; the spooky monologue of a statue, Our Lady of Willesden, ‘the Black Madonna’; and a scene at a pharmacy, when Leah is given the wrong packet of photographs, one with pictures of Shar. Hard to tell the significance of that 37: a prime number; the normal human body temperature in Celsius; the number of plays attributed to Shakespeare; the number, according to Wikipedia, that most people pick when asked to name a random number between 0 and 100. In years, it’s two more than Leah’s age in the novel, and Smith turned 37 on 25 October 2012. In the second section Felix sees a picture of his father on page 37 of a book of photographs, and in the third section the chapter numbered 37 is omitted (185 = 37 x 5). The number 37 bus (at least fictionally) used to go from Kilburn to Camden. (The real, current 37 follows a South London route, between Putney Heath and Peckham.)”

Four gardens along, in the estate, a grim girl on the third floor screams Anglo-Saxon at nobody. Juliet balcony, projecting for miles. It ain't like that. Nah it ain't like that. Don't you start. Fag in hand. Fleshy, lobster-red.

I am the sole

I am the sole author (*NW* 3)

The introductory part of the novel reproduces fragmentariness and complexity of human thinking which is neither linear, nor chronological. It often takes time to decode the meaning of what is presented, sometimes it does not really make sense as the thoughts and reflections are not easily decipherable for the individual concerned either. It is not always perfectly clear who is speaking, which, of course, is significant as the point of the whole novel resides in this fundamental question. "Sentences are curt and clipped, meted out in stingy servings of nouns and verbs denied the luxury of richer grammar. The effect is jumpy, jittery, the early scenes infused with the same kind of foreboding that causes the guard at the start of Hamlet to call out, "Who's there?" It's a reasonable question" (Schwartz). Is it Leah Hanwell, is it the narrator or is it Zadie Smith herself? Actually, it is all of them and many other contemporary humans on whose behalf they speak.

Throughout the "Visitation" part, Leah Hanwell is depicted in everyday situations, at work or in ordinary interactions with her friends (namely Natalie Blake), her husband Michel and mother Pauline. The events do not follow one another, time shifting from the present to the past. As far as the past is concerned, readers get the account of what formed Leah through her current memories and contemplations, Smith does not force the readers to travel years to the past. This aspect of the narration reminds of Clarissa Dalloway going up and down the London streets, within twenty-four hours heading towards one particular event at the end of the day, time being an important motif in the story and yet relative. In "Visitation", readers can feel time flowing, it is in contrast to Leah's passivity and inability to move on in the middle of the world that keeps moving (or at least seems to). "Overnight everyone has grown up. While she was becoming, everyone grew up and became." (*NW* 68) The contrast also appears in one of the unpleasant conversations between Leah and Pauline on her not being a mother yet: "She knows the pull of her animal nature should, by now, be making the decisions. Perhaps she's been a city fox too long. Every new arrival – the announcements seem to come now every day – feels like a terrible betrayal. Why won't

everybody stay still? She has forced a stillness in herself, but it has not stopped the world from continuing on.” (NW 78) As both the quotations suggest, Leah regrets being immobile while the world around has been developing. However, at the same time she desires to stay still. “I want to stay still and to keep moving,” remarks she (NW 78). This sentence indicates two possible life choices, as Leah continues “I want this life and another” (NW 78). Finally, she does not live any of these since she remains at the crossroads, in the middle of the decision-making process not able to set on either path. This inability to act together with the narrative techniques employed in the “Visitation” part illustrate discontinuity of contemporary life and the resulting identity crisis.

The following part, titled “Guest”, is actually a spin-off since it develops a concrete event that already happened in “Visitation”. When Leah watches television she overhears news on Felix Cooper, a young man murdered by two youths. “Guest” returns a few hours earlier and follows what preceded the crime, focusing on another NW character.

The second part consists of three longer chapters marked by postal codes of London areas – NW6, W1, NW6 – according to Felix’s journey around the city. The narrative is rather traditional and chronological, less fragmentary and more consistent. The structure is perfectly in line with Felix’s actions as he always proceeds directly from one point to another without any radical movements in time. Regarding the language, Smith abandons previously frequent digressions from English syntactical and grammatical rules. Time of the second part stretches again over no more than several hours within which the protagonist encounters various people. The story depicts an ordinary day of an ordinary man while, simultaneously, this ordinary man and the story as well are heading towards a radical change of his life, a final catharsis in which the whole action should result. Contrary to the expectations, he dies as a victim of mischance and coincidence, two powerful elements in postmodern era as we observe in agreement with Bauman.

“Host” is the third and most extensive part focused on Natalie Blake. Similarly to the first part it is composed of 185 brief chapters<sup>6</sup>, each having a number and a title expressing the content. The entries differ in length, sometimes being only a single phrase (“124. A tenancy meeting question Ms Blake, would you be prepared to represent someone from the

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, there are in only 184 chapters, number 37 missing. See footnote number 4 for more information.

BNP”, NW 245), on other occasions containing several paragraphs. “Host” is the most detailed part and it is obvious that Natalie Blake is definitely given a noteworthy prominence in comparison to the other characters.

The text follows Natalie from her childhood to adult life. Despite the chronology, “Host” represents fragmentariness in the most genuine form. The whole life of a human is summed up to the clipped episodes, events not being more than pieces of memory, each of them transformed into an image in the Baumanian kaleidoscope. Actually, the structure is a copy of Natalie’s identity since it is a collage of various influences that she approved enough to incorporate them into the image of herself. It also refers to the postmodern individuals’ difficulties in figuring out who they are: “We are piecing together the story of Keisha’s life, not at all unlike the way she perceives herself to be piecing together her own identity out of disparate fragments.” (Franklin)

“Host” is a highly heterogeneous part of the novel since it is based on materials of various kind: pieces of conversations, smooth descriptions of past events, personal reflections, authentic chats on the Internet forums where speakers ignore English grammatical and syntactical rules, omit subjects and punctuation, and forget about the right spelling of English words:

**hi finally**  
that wasn’t so hard now was it  
**just don’t like downloading things**  
me no like computerz (NW 243)

Formal style alternates with colloquial and vulgar expressions (“*My Latin’s rusty – I have no fucking clue...*”, NW 235), sometimes single expressions substitute whole sentences like at the moment of Natalie and her husband Frank’s honeymoon description:

Sun.  
Prosecco.  
Sky, bleached.  
Swallows. Arc. Dip.  
Pebbles blue.  
Pebbles red.  
Elevator to the beach. (NW 235)

The holiday experiences are again mere fragments which, however, denote a selection of nice adventures – unique moments, great weather, good wine, an idyll and a life

achievement that does not need further comments. After all, this is all that a postmodern tourist needs both in literal and metaphorical sense.

“Host” is the section where Zadie Smith herself is most present, she is the narrator who communicates her own ideas and observations about the world through the characters. She makes the commentaries that, obviously, could not be made by the protagonists themselves (Schwartz)<sup>7</sup>: “She had the dildo for only a couple of weeks but in that time used it regularly, sometimes as much as several times a day, often without washing in between, and always in this business-like way, as if delegating a task to somebody else.” (NW 189–190)

“Host” is followed by two minor parts. In “Crossing” Natalie meets Nathan Bogle with whom she travels through North Western London streets. From the beginning it is clear that the journey does not have any particular destination as Natalie leaves her home in the middle of an argument with Frank and her answer to the question where she is going is “Nowhere” (NW 300). The journey as well as Nathan’s appearance on the scene are accidental, without any purpose. “Crossing” is divided into six small sections restricted by the names of several geographical locations that help readers follow Natalie and Nathan’s path. In addition, the locations emphasize the connection between the city, the characters and their identity, and represent the only delimitations of the journey. Natalie and Nathan wander, in fact their random movement has become the purpose itself, the real mode of existence, which is an apt metaphor for postmodern humans’ identities, their fluidity, instability, superficiality and variability. It is not by accident that the narrative is preoccupied with walking: “She turned and walked back in the direction of Caldwell. Walking was what she did now, walking was what she was. She was nothing more or less than the phenomenon of walking. She had no name, no biography, no characteristics. They had all fled into paradox.” (NW 304)

As the novel’s layout suggests, Nathan Bogle is not a central protagonist of the book. Smith does not provide us with any thorough account of his life or thoughts. Instead of

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<sup>7</sup> In this context Schwartz speaks of a superego: “Then there is the question of who narrates these fragmentary passages. Sometimes we hear Keisha’s voice—indeed, both of her voices. But there is another narrator, too, a superego who hovers above the action offering commentary.” In our view, it is the author who stands above the characters in the microcosm of a novel, their rules defining the settings. Therefore, we speak of the author at this point.

being a character he is a symbol of the inescapable past – with him Natalie is no longer Natalie but becomes Keisha again. “She stood up and started walking as fast as she could, but when she looked over her shoulder he was still behind her.” (NW 318) This quotation does not refer only to that particular encounter, it also refers to whole Natalie’s life and identity. No matter how laboriously and methodically she has tried to create a new person of herself, she cannot erase Keisha completely.

Compared to “Host”, “Crossing” is not fragmentary, instead it resembles Felix’s part in terms of language, themes and the narrative. Actually, the episodic structure would not be in line with Natalie’s development. In this part readers already know who Natalie Blake is and, furthermore, Natalie comes closer to her original identity, Keisha, whom she reconciles with.

The final part of *NW* is again titled “Visitation”. It is an 11-pages long chapter where the life stories of all the main characters intersect.

It is significant that the titles of all the parts are from the same lexical field, suggesting a movement from one point to another. Thus, Felix is always a guest, his day is a series of visits at the other people’s places. He is in fact forbidden to come home – when near to his place, he is murdered, never finishing the task of the settlement both in terms of simply coming home at the end of the day and in terms of the life perspective since Felix wants to start a new life with his girlfriend. To be a host means to receive other persons as guests. In this case, Natalie Blake hosts different personalities within her own body and mind. To pay a visit as well as to transfer from one identity to another assumes that a person has to cross a certain distance, therefore crossing. Visitation is an ambiguous word – on the one hand it denotes an unpleasant visit, which is a suitable meaning in terms of the novel’s first part when Shar rings at Leah’s door and begs her for money. However, visitation is also a term for an apparition, an appearance of a supernatural character or an event considered to be a divine punishment. The latter meaning is relevant for the novel’s final part when Natalie and Leah report Nathan Bogle to the police and identify him as Felix’s murderer. This event functions as a miraculous *deus ex machina* which reconciles Leah with Natalie and also Natalie with Keisha:

Leah found the number online. Natalie dialled it. It was Keisha who did the talking. Apart from the fact she drew the phone from her own pocket, the whole process reminded her of nothing so much as those calls the two good friends used to make to boys they liked, back in the day, and always in a slightly hysterical state of mind, two heads pressed together over a handset.

“I got something to tell you,” said Keisha Blake, disguising her voice with her voice. (NW 337)

Through this act, the two old friends, namely Natalie who initiated the act, actually try to get rid of their past, it definitely can be interpreted as a gesture of resistance towards one’s own determination. They are symbolically killing the past represented by Nathan Bogle. Besides, the unsuccessful Nathan who ended up on the street and struggles through life embodies everything that the heroines are expected to overcome in the course of their lives. However hard they try, it remains impossible because finally Natalie ends up as Keisha again.

The structure of the novel as well as the titles of its parts suggest the variability of postmodern identities. If a person keeps changing contexts, through encounters with different people, visits and traveling around different places, it inevitably results in perpetual changing of roles and identity modes. The circumstances keep forcing an individual to evaluate current conditions and adapt their project of the self to them. In the following chapter we demonstrate how the adaptation process results in the adoption of the four postmodern identity types described in the theoretical part.

## **3.2 NW Characters and Identity**

### **3.2.1 Leah**

Even though Natalie Blake is without any doubt the prominent and the most developed character in the novel, given the length of her part and the fact that readers are allowed to follow her from childhood to maturity, the position of Leah Hanwell is significant as well. The reason does not reside only in the importance of her as a model for Natalie’s personality, Leah’s significance also lies in her being the primary definer for all the other characters. It is actually the first part where other main protagonists are mentioned, always in the context with Leah and therefore through her perspective. Natalie appears as her old

friend, Nathan is a childhood memory, Felix is a mention on television. Anyway, Leah is unable to identify herself as an agent both in relation to the others and herself (Schwartz). This fundamental incapacity and insurmountable difficulty is obvious from the first lines of the novel. “I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me,” overhears Leah in the radio (NW 3). She tries to write the sentence down, however, “pencil leaves no mark on magazine pages” (NW 3).

As a young girl Leah used to be a popular, easy-going girl who got on well with all sorts of people. At the time of the novel, she is a young woman who has wasted the opportunities and the potential she used to have. “We made sure you had all the lessons, fifty pee here, fifty pee there, it all adds up! And we didn’t always have it! That was your father – God rest him – he didn’t want you to grow up feeling poor, even though we *were* poor. But you never really settled on the one thing,” says her mother Pauline (NW 77). Leah would be a versatile person, as young she did the piano and the dancing, studied philosophy and at the same time she managed to engage in environmental activism. As a tourist she used to be constantly on the move, finding new experiences and adventures that enriched her personal universe. She travelled between different points, but finally she ended up as a vagabond aimlessly wandering around. “As an adult, Leah’s talent for moving among worlds has stranded her somewhere permanently in between” (Schwartz), not taking any of the roads she was given, ending up with a mediocre occupation where even the colour of her skin informs us at the first sight that she does not fit in the collective, ending up with a husband whom she married rather out of circumstances than love, with no shift on the social ladder. In the same manner as the vagabond who is always uprooted and a stranger for everyone, it is impossible to discover the true Leah Hanwell and know her. A perfect example is her lies to her husband Michel who wishes to have children with Leah. However, she only pretends the endeavour and secretly undergoes several interruptions. For Michel, to conceive a child when being a married couple is a natural and logical step while Leah “fears the destination. [...] Things change! We’re getting there, no? The woman does not know where there is. She did not know they had set off, nor in which direction the wind is blowing. She does not want to arrive” (NW 24) or elsewhere: “She doesn’t want to ‘go forward’. For Leah, that way is not forward. She wants just him and her forever” (NW 93). Regarding destinations, it is even possible to trace mockery in “Visitation”. On page 38

readers can find a precise description how to get from Yates Lane to Bartlett Avenue in London. The instructions are followed by this commentary: “These directions are for planning purposes only. You may find that construction projects, traffic, weather, or other events may cause conditions to differ from the map results, and you should plan your route accordingly. You must obey all signs or notices regarding your route.” (NW 39) This is a useful metaphor as well as a significant reference to both Giddens and Bauman, to the reflexive project of the self and the requirement to be always prepared for a change.

Despite the mocking tone, the heroine is at the same time in the conflict with the lack of purpose characteristic for her life. She keeps reflecting the current state of affairs and simultaneously does not cease to think about a different one. “I want this life and another” (NW 78). “What would she do with 37 lives! She has one life,” thinks she (NW 43). In line with Giddens’s conception of the postmodern self she keeps turning to herself and addressing the issue of her identity: “She is no one. Time has eaten away all detail: no name no date no face no knees no feet no explanation of the mysterious gift—“ (NW 73), “she is made of thirst, she is only thirst” (NW 74). Various answers to the *who are you?* question imply the postmodern identity instability, uncertainty and the resulting identity trauma.

### **3.2.2 Felix**

“I want to get on with my life,” says Felix to his ex-girlfriend Annie when he comes to visit her for the last time (NW 162). He is the only character in the novel who is willing to actively change his life and, however disagreeable it might be, to get over his past before a brand new start. While all the other protagonists spend time thinking and hesitating to act, Felix decides to abandon the miserable existence of a womanizer and a loser addicted to drugs and alcohol. Instead he wants to settle down with his new girlfriend Grace and to raise a child, he wishes to reconcile with his life and to give it a new direction. This all represents a destination towards which he is heading on a clearly marked way. Therefore, Felix’s life journey resembles that of a pilgrim.

Felix regards his endeavour as a commitment, which is proved by his last encounter with Annie. He is aware that the visit is going to be unpleasant and painful, however, to continue the journey that he has opted for he has to finish the preceding one. A pilgrim can never set on two pilgrimages at the same time.

Felix's visions and plans are confronted with postmodern reality. It is Annie who criticizes Felix's decision:

'I'm out,' said Felix and began walking away.  
'What a mealy-mouthed pathetic word, "relationship". For people who haven't the guts to live, haven't the imagination to fill their three score and ten with anything other than –'  
[...]  
'It's what people do these days, isn't it? When they can't think of anything else to do. No politics, no ideas, no balls. Get *married*. But I've transcended all that.' (NW 162–163)

Annie's opinions imply that under postmodern conditions Felix's choice and mode of life are undesirable. She regards him as too cowardly to rely only on himself and find satisfaction within the realm of his individuality as he wishes to share life and be happy with another person. To choose a woman and be willing to be faithful means to abstain from all the possible pleasures and adventures he could experience with other women. From Annie's point of view such a life project is plain and ordinary. "'I've got more balls than are dreamt of in your philosophy. [...] I could be mouldering in some Hampshire pile at this very moment, covering and recovering sofas with some baron in perfect sexless harmony,'" claims Annie and confirms she does not care for such an existence (NW 163). However, who of the two is more courageous? The answer is clear since it is Felix who revolts against the basis of the contemporary life, representing the only character who seriously applies his right to choose, a right so typical for postmodern times, while Annie does not digress from the paths offered and prescribed by the contemporary society. In this sense, Annie is a postmodern stroller convinced of being the sole author of the dictionary that defines her, to paraphrase Smith, while appearing in a performance directed by others. "We are not the sole authors of the dictionaries that define us; in fact, we are not, even in part, the authors of who we are. The freedoms afforded to us—the liberties of the market—are in fact working against us, making us less, not more, free." (Marcus 70) The final scene

between her and Felix provides the evidence as her poor existence is devastated by the goodbye.

The degree of Felix's agency might be questioned since he does not make his decisions purely out of himself. In fact, it happens on the account of meeting Grace and love. On the other hand, the character of Grace might be regarded as a resource which Felix could have used in a completely different way. Therefore, he definitely is an autonomous agent. Nevertheless, there is a phenomenon that Felix is unable to control or influence – mere coincidence, another feature that gained importance with postmodernism. His death is a result of being in a wrong place at a wrong time. This event represents the ultimate opposition against Felix's revolt and impossibility to live a coherent life.

### **3.2.3 Natalie**

As Smith observes, "Natalie Blake was crazy busy with self-invention" (NW 212). Natalie's personality is basically a collage consisting of various systematically and methodically selected elements. Considering this fact, Natalie is a real designer of how other people perceive her, Leah Hanwell being her model:

"It had never occurred to Keisha Blake that her friend Leah Hanwell was in possession of a particular type of personality. Like most children, theirs was a relation based on verbs, not nouns. [...] Together they ran, jumped, danced, sang, bathed [...] But now they were leaving Quinton Primary for Brayton Comprehensive, where everybody seemed to have a personality, and so Keisha looked at Leah and tried to ascertain the outline of her personality." (NW 182)

Without Leah, either her physical or metaphorical presence (that is to say through the appropriation of her traits), "Keisha Blake felt herself to be revealed and exposed" (NW 194). Thus, Natalie started inventing herself according to an image of who she desired to be, changing the name and adding layers to the original person until it became undetectable. "You're the only person I can be all of myself with," tells her Leah (NW 211) and Natalie is terrified as she realizes "that if reversed the statement would be rendered practically meaningless, Ms Blake having no self to be" (NW 2011).

Natalie wishes to live up the society's expectations, her goal is to move up the social ladder and to be successful. Nor the law studies, neither the marriage arise from Natalie's

passion or enthusiasm. Instead these events and actions are calculated and premeditated. She longs for perfection in the eyes of the others, constantly adapting herself to nothing but an image. “On the website she was what everybody was looking for”, reflects she on her activities in the online world (NW 265). Finally, she is a mere “fake”, as her friend Layla observes (NW 282). “Natalie Blake who told people she abhorred expensive gadgets and detested the Internet, adored her phone, and was helplessly, compulsively, adverbly addicted to the Internet.” (NW 259)

For Natalie, truth is stranger than fiction (NW 181) and fiction is more believable than reality. In that sense, she is a postmodern stroller. Naturally, the discrepancy between Natalie’s image and her inner world must have manifested somewhere, the result being the secret online activities which subvert her life and finally threaten her relationship with Frank.

Concerning the degree of Natalie’s agency, she feels and appears to be a director of her life. Nevertheless, she is always under the rule of what is desirable and expected in the concerned context. Despite this fact she believes to be an independent individual in control of her actions.

Leah turned in her hammock and showed Natalie her back.  
‘I just don’t understand why I have this life,’ she said quietly.  
‘What?’  
‘You, me, all of us. Why that girls and not us. Why the poor bastard on Albert Road. It doesn’t make sense to me.’  
[...]  
‘Because we worked harder. [...] We were smarter and we knew we didn’t want to end up begging on other people’s doorsteps. We wanted to get out. People Like Bogle – they didn’t want it enough.’ (NW 336)

This conviction is paradoxical if we consider that it is Natalie whose meticulously created world collapses at the end of the novel, and that finally all the characters have to confront the same issues.

### **3.2.4 Nathan**

Nathan’s task throughout the story is not to resolve his own identity crisis. He serves rather as a mediator through which the others’ inner conflict, namely that of Natalie, are partially

explored. As mentioned above, there is no section dedicated to Nathan Bogle's course of life, he is present in the stories of the remaining characters with whose life projects he interacts. Besides, he represents the author's self-expression as it is his voice through which Smith comments on the society and structural determination of individuals' fates.

Even though Nathan Bogle attended the same school as both Leah and Natalie, shared the neighbourhood with them and had a similar starting point, he ends up as a less fortunate adult. Having been expelled from school, he became a drug addict and is living basically on the street. Aware of the burden represented either by his class, race or cultural background, he abandoned any further efforts to improve his conditions. Therefore, every encounter with him reminds persons of their own past and the eventuality of turning out badly as well. "There's no way to live in this country when you're grown. Not at all. They don't want you, your own people don't want you, no one wants you," explains Nathan in the conversation with Natalie (NW 317), indicating his passivity and resignation. In that sense *NW* deals with "determined aspects of inequality: those determinacies born out of where we live and what we do" (Marcus 70).

Compared to Natalie, Nathan is an authentic person. "I'm on the street, Keisha. I had some bad luck. Novlene don't tell people the truth. But I'm not going to lie. You can see. Here I am. What you see is what you get." (NW 310–311)

Naturally, Nathan Bogle is a vagabond who struggles through life, completely uncertain about what is going to happen the next day. His life is a matter of survival, the ultimate determination being his own death.

It's just a death sentence.'

What?

Kids. If they get born, they're gonna die. So that's what you're giving them at the end of the day. (NW 310)

Therefore, Nathan perceives life as a misery and a futile endeavour, the existence having no other result than the end.

## 4 Conclusion

This Bachelor's thesis is concerned with the issue of identity crisis in Zadie Smith's *NW*. It investigates the theme in reference to postmodern ethics and dilemma of agency and structure. The analysis of the quest for identity, one of the principal themes in multicultural literature, is not perceived only as a struggle of an individual, but also as a wider social problem of the contemporary period. Therefore, the thesis explores individuals' interactions with the systems they inhabit, one's personal responsibility of forming their own identity, the control of the process and the restriction of such autonomy by the above-mentioned structures.

With regards to the experimental form of the novel, the exploration of the identity crisis issues could not be ignored at the level of the novel's identity itself. Both the structure of the novel and the employed narrative techniques represent a significant evidence of the contemporary life fragmentariness, discontinuity and variability. Since the structure is inextricably bound up with the novel's characters, each section focusing one of them, the form itself supports their identity issues. The narrative is episodic and sometimes incoherent, its syntactical and grammatical structure being often disrupted in the same way as the image of the postmodern self is. Where the characters course of life is more telic and resembles the modern model of the pilgrim, the overall style of the text acquires more characteristics of a non-experimental form, where the journey corresponds to the Bauman's classification of postmodern urban identity types, the narrative is in line with the above-mentioned attributes.

As far as the realization of the identity types is concerned, the Bauman's postmodern models are embodied by all the four main protagonists. We observed the vagabond type in connection with the characters of Natalie Blake, Nathan Bogle and Leah Hanwell. Nevertheless, as identity is an unstable category in postmodern conditions, the identity changes through time. As a result, Natalie Blake becomes also a stroller and a tourist, the latter being identified in relation to Leah Hanwell's past as well. Surprisingly, the efforts to appropriate the pilgrim's identity were detected in the novel, concerning Felix Cooper's life trajectory. However, finally he is prevented from realizing his project, being accidentally murdered, this act implying the inevitability of certain postmodern phenomena

that define an individual's life, i. e. coincidence. In this case, Felix Cooper is deprived of personal autonomy that would otherwise result in a radical revolt towards the possible identities offered by the structure.

The thesis proves that under postmodern circumstances the identity creation is, to a certain degree, a matter of personal autonomy. An individual's identity is not predetermined as it once used to be, instead it is flexible and likely to be transformed in the course of life. An individual has the power to transfer among different identity types and to adapt the project of the self to the current circumstances. However, the process cannot be perceived only as a sovereign right since the perpetual self-modifications are required socially. Individuals enter interactions with higher structural units that provide them with resources enabling transformations. On the other hand, the same resources, available at a particular situation, restrict personal choices and decisions. Thus, we observe that an individual can never be completely free from its historical, social or cultural background. It is particularly reflected in the relation between Natalie's and Keisha's identities, both of them belonging to a single person who tries to replace the latter with the former, finding out her efforts unsuccessful, her past symbolised by Nathan Bogle being inescapable. Structural limitations have also been detected in Natalie's perpetual adaptations of her image to the external conditions, i. e. the society's expectations of who Natalie Blake as a successful lawyer, wife and mother should be. Her behaviour is an apt example of reflexivity during the process of the self-formation as proposed by Giddens. Moreover, such observations are in line with Bauman's theoretical approach, namely his findings on the stroller's mode of life, as Natalie, who perceives herself as an autonomous agent fully in control of her self-creation, in fact only incorporates various identities offered by the society. Therefore, both Bauman's and Giddens's approach proved to be useful theoretical frameworks for an identity crisis analysis in a work of multicultural literature, being complementary to one another.

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