



ISSN 2455-393X

**Journal of the English Literator Society**

Volume 11 Issue 6 November 2025 | [www.jels.in](http://www.jels.in)



Research Article

## **Hanwell to Hell: A Study of Zadie Smith's Perspectives on Postmodernism**

**Shri Nidhi. M**

*Ph.D. Full Time Research Scholar, PG and Research Department of English, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science College(Autonomous) Trichy-620023, Tamil Nadu, India.*

*Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy-620024, Tamil Nadu, India;*

*shrinishi0910@gmail.com*

**Dr. D. Dhanalakshmi**

*Head, Associate Professor and Research Advisor, PG and Research Department of English, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science College (Autonomous) Trichy-620023, Tamil Nadu, India. Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy-620024, Tamil Nadu, India;*

*ddengevr@gmail.com*

Published online: 5 November 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17528748>

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper undertakes a comprehensive study of Zadie Smith's *Hanwell in Hell* within the broader context of her literary work, situating it against the backdrop of postmodernist literary traditions. The study aims to investigate Smith's negotiation with postmodern strategies such as fragmentation, metafiction and irony, while highlighting how she adapts these devices to address diasporic identity, cultural hybridity and existential concerns. The paper seeks to analyze the textual and thematic implications of postmodernism in her works and assess how her narratives move beyond relativism to articulate ethical, cultural and diasporic dimensions of identity. Through qualitative close reading, discourse analysis and intertextual mapping, the research interprets the paradigmatic shift in her fiction. The novel portrays Hanwell as he confronts memory, mortality and alienation, dramatizing postmodern fragmentation while retaining a deeply human center. The implied theory includes Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction and Baudrillard's simulacra, supplemented by postcolonial and metamodern readings. The research findings suggest that her fiction



---

reflects a hybridized postmodernism and employs postmodern strategies as tools to interrogate diaspora, memory and cultural displacement.

**KEYWORDS:** Postmodernism, Diasporic negotiation, Memory, Alienation and Cultural theory

## FULL PAPER

Zadie Smith, one of the most influential contemporary British novelists engages profoundly with postmodernist traditions while extending them into ethically and culturally resonant domains. *Hanwell in Hell* (2019) focuses on memory and the erosion of identity. *White Teeth* (2000) explores multicultural London and diasporic negotiation; *On Beauty* (2005) a transatlantic reworking of Forsterian realism, *NW* (2012) a fragmented narrative of urban precarity and *Swing Time* (2016) a study of friendship, race and performance each illuminate different dimensions of postmodern fragmentation and cultural hybridity. These works provide the textual foundation for analyzing Smith's unique reconfiguration of postmodernism.

### Research Objectives:

- To analyze the textual and thematic implications of postmodernism in Smith's works and to assess how her narratives move beyond relativism to articulate ethical, cultural and diasporic dimensions of identity.
- To investigate Smith's negotiation with postmodern strategies such as fragmentation, metafiction and irony.

### Literature Review

Zadie Smith's works have primarily concentrated on her novels, particularly *White Teeth* and *While her short fiction Hanwell in Hell* remains comparatively underexplored. Lourdes López-Ropero (2020) examines *NW* through a post-feminist and postcolonial lens, highlighting the intersections of race, gender and neoliberal pressures in urban London. Her analysis sheds light on Smith's portrayal of contemporary subject hood, it overlooks the application of postmodern theory to Smith's shorter works, leaving a gap for studies like this one to address. Similarly, Intisar R. Khaleel (2018) employs structuralist and hybridity frameworks in *White Teeth* to explore identity formation across generations. Although this study provides

---

valuable insights into cultural hybridity, it neglects to consider how her narrative techniques employ fragmentation and metafiction features crucial to understanding her postmodern positioning.

Ne'am Abd Elhafeez (2024) extends the discussion by examining the postmodern city in NW through Baudrillard's notion of hyper reality, arguing that the urban landscape embodies alienation and psychological disorientation. Yet, this study remains focused on spatiality and does not probe the ethical and affective dimensions of Smith's writing. Specific essays on *Hanwell in Hell* by critics such as Sharon Raynor and Lexi Stuckey have emphasized dispossession, disillusionment and the problem of color-blindness, but their analyses remain thematic, lacking sustained theoretical engagement with postmodernism. The theoretical frameworks by Linda Hutcheon on historiographic metafiction and Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra have been widely cited in postmodern studies. The research gaps reveal three areas for development, the categorization of Smith's short stories, the insufficient linkage of her themes to postmodern frameworks and the neglect of ethical and emotional resonance in discussions of her narrative strategies.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in postmodern literary theory, particularly the ideas of Linda Hutcheon and Jean Baudrillard. Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction provides a lens to examine Smith's use of fragmented narrative, self-reflexivity and intertextuality. Hutcheon argues that postmodern texts both question and re-inscribe historical and cultural narratives, a perspective highly relevant to *Hanwell in Hell*, where memory and temporality resist linear coherence yet retain moral gravity. Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyper reality illuminates the blurring of reality and representation in Smith's story, as Hanwell's perception of his life oscillates between lived experience and fragmented memory. Postcolonial and metamodern perspectives further underpin this framework: postcolonial thought situates Smith's diasporic contexts within the aftermath of empire, while meta modernism (as theorized by Vermeulen and van den Akker) helps articulate Smith's oscillation between irony and sincerity, detachment and ethical engagement. This hybrid theoretical grounding enables a nuanced reading of how Smith both employs and critiques postmodernist strategies.

### **Methodology**

The methodology adopted for this paper is rooted in a qualitative and interpretive framework that combines literary analysis with theoretical application. The research is primarily text-based, analyzing through close reading and contextual interpretation. The paper situates Smith's narrative strategies within the broader paradigms of postmodernism, engaging with themes of fragmentation, irony,

---

temporality and the instability of meaning. Critical insights are drawn from postmodern and cultural theory to explore the intersections between her narrative practice and larger philosophical debates about identity, reality and representation. This methodology acknowledges that postmodern texts resist singular interpretations. Hence, the analysis remains multi-angled, considering aesthetic, philosophical and socio-cultural dimensions simultaneously. Comparative references to her other works, *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man* and *On Beauty*, are also integrated to trace intertextual resonances and thematic continuities across her oeuvre.

### Implied Theories

Two primary theoretical frameworks inform this study: Linda Hutcheon's postmodern poetics and Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra. Hutcheon conceptualizes postmodernism as a mode of "complicit critique," where texts simultaneously embrace and question the systems they inhabit (Hutcheon 2). Baudrillard's notion of simulacra and the hyper real offers another lens for reading *Hanwell in Hell*. Hanwell's experiences of memory and mortality often blur reality with its representation, creating a space where lived life is inseparable from mediated forms. His reflections detached, fragmented, and often metafictional suggest that his identity itself functions as a kind of simulacrum, echoing but never fully grasping an "authentic" self. The Baudrillard lens highlights Smith's engagement with the postmodern collapse between reality and representation. Hutcheon and Baudrillard provide a theoretical scaffolding that allows for an analysis of Smith's text as both postmodern critique and cultural commentary.

### Discussion

*Hanwell in Hell* forms part of Smith's story cycle *Grand Union* (2019) and follows the life of Hanwell, an ordinary man whose trajectory is defined by loss, memory and alienation. The story situates Hanwell in the aftermath of personal grief, exploring his confrontation with mortality and his attempt to find meaning amid dislocation. Hanwell embodies the postmodern everyman: a character whose fragmented memories, estrangement from place, and struggle to articulate coherence reflect broader cultural anxieties. His reflections are episodic, resisting linearity, and his voice often questions its own reliability. Rather than offering closure, she uses Hanwell's life as an allegory for postmodern existence haunted by absence, mediated through language and suspended between irony and sincerity. In this sense, the plot of *Hanwell in Hell* is less a narrative of events than an exploration of consciousness under postmodern conditions. It dramatizes alienation and fractured temporality while hinting at the persistence of ethical longing, positioning Hanwell as both a victim of and a response to the uncertainties of the contemporary world.

### Zadie Smith and the Postmodern Condition

---

*Hanwell in Hell* occupies an interstitial space within contemporary fiction, functioning less as narrative than as a site of theoretical inquiry into the postmodern condition. Smith mobilizes a protagonist whose ordinary life embodies the exhaustion of modernity's teleologies, dramatizing the collapse of coherent identity, stable temporality and transcendental meaning. This textual strategy is best apprehended through Leotard's "incredulity toward meta narratives," for Hanwell's experiences testify to the impossibility of grand interpretive frameworks in a fragmented late-capitalist milieu. Smith does not replicate the celebratory relativism often associated with early postmodernism. Instead, her text oscillates between irony and a residual yearning for ethical coherence. When Hanwell admits, "I lived in rooms that never seemed mine" (Smith 146), the statement dramatizes a subjectivity dispossessed of belonging, functioning as a miniature allegory of postmodern alienation. Smith's fiction thereby re-situates post modernity as less a theoretical abstraction than a lived predicament, inscribing philosophical debates into the fragile consciousness of an everyman.

### **Fragmentation and Memory: Postmodern Temporality in Hanwell in Hell**

The temporality structuring Smith's narrative exemplifies the postmodern dismantling of linear chronology. In Jameson's analysis, the "waning of affect" and the "fragmentation of temporality" characterize the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson 25). Hanwell's life is presented not as teleological sequence but as a series of disjointed impressions, each resisting subsumption into narrative coherence. Smith deploys memory as a disruptive mechanism, illustrating the instability of subjective recollection. Here, recollection is refracted through textuality, echoing Baudrillard's assertion that the real is always mediated by its representation. Memory ceases to be guarantor of selfhood; instead, it exemplifies the hyper real, where the signifier proliferates without securing reference. The postmodern temporality of this work thus resists both nostalgia and futurity, suspending the subject in an eternal present of fragmented impressions. Smith's technique enacts Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction, in which personal pasts and cultural histories alike are destabilized, becoming contingent narratives rather than foundational truths.

### **Postmodern Irony Versus Ethical Resonance**

Linda Hutcheon insists that postmodern irony is not an empty relativism. Smith mobilizes this double-coded irony to explore the precariousness of ethical commitment in an age suspicious of transcendence. When Hanwell reflects, "Death will come like a stranger, and I doubt it will explain anything" (Smith 154), the line performs postmodern irony: mortality, the ultimate universal, is rendered absurdly opaque. Yet the text resists collapsing into nihilism. The very irony that deconstructs meaning simultaneously gestures toward its necessity, for to dismiss death's "explanation"

---

presupposes an ethical longing for such coherence. Thus, Smith's narrative exemplifies the paradoxical movement between dismantling and reassertion.

### **Hanwell as a Postmodern Everyman**

Hanwell functions as a paradigmatic postmodern subject: an "everyman" stripped of mythic grandeur yet burdened with existential fragmentation. Jameson's theorization of the postmodern subject as decentered and depthless resonates here, but Smith complicates the model by insisting on the persistence of interiority despite fragmentation. Hanwell remarks, "I will never know the whole, but perhaps fragments are enough" (Smith 156). This aphorism epitomizes the postmodern recognition of incompleteness while resisting despair. The "fragments" do not simply signify loss; they become the condition of possibility for meaning, albeit provisional. In this sense, Hanwell is not merely illustrative of postmodern dissolution but of adaptation within it. He embodies what Baudrillard describes as the subject who lives within the "desert of the real," negotiating a landscape where authenticity is irretrievably mediated. Yet Smith refuses to empty this figure of affect. Her everyman dramatizes how ordinary existence sustains itself within the very conditions of alienation.

### **Diasporic Echoes and the Postcolonial Dimension**

Hanwell in Hell does not explicitly foreground diasporic identity, but her works invariably embeds postcolonial resonances. Hanwell's estrangement from place and history mirrors Bhabha's conception of the "third space," where identity is negotiated in hybridity rather than secured in origin (Bhabha 37). The protagonist's dislocation allegorizes the broader postcolonial condition of deterritorialization. He encapsulates the instability of belonging central to diasporic subjectivity. This articulation transcends individual psychology, staging a cultural symptom of globalization in which identity is perpetually provisional. By inflecting postmodern alienation with diasporic undertones, Smith signals the convergence of postmodern and postcolonial discourses. The fragmentary subject of late capitalism overlaps with the hybrid subject of postcoloniality, suggesting that the two conditions, though distinct, intersect in contemporary lived experience.

### **Intertextual Resonances: Smith's Oeuvre and Postmodern Strategies**

Intertextuality, as theorized by Kristeva, situates every text as "a mosaic of quotations" (Kristeva 66). Smith's narrative exploits this postmodern strategy, not merely through allusion but through the protagonist's very self-understanding. The subject is constituted through textual echoes, dissolving the boundary between lived life and cultural script. This resonates with *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*, where characters struggle to articulate originality within an intertextual cultural matrix. Hanwell's experience is less individual than symptomatic, exemplifying postmodern subjectivity's dependence on borrowed language and mediated memory. Through



---

intertextuality, Smith demonstrates Hutcheon's claim that postmodern texts inscribe themselves into cultural history even as they destabilize it.

### **Postmodern Death and the Question of Meaning**

Derrida reminds us that death is the impossible signified: always deferred, always exceeding representation (Derrida 28). Smith stages this impossibility through Hanwell's reflections on mortality. His remark renders death as both unknowable and meaningless, resisting the consolatory teleologies of religious or metaphysical frameworks. Yet the postmodern void is not left unqualified. When Hanwell adds, "If I cannot find meaning in death, I will find it in the living who remain" (Smith 155), the narrative redirects attention from transcendence to immanence, from metaphysics to ethics. The meaninglessness of death becomes the ground for affirming relationality among the living. In this sense, Smith exemplifies the shift from modernist existential anguish to postmodern ethical provisionality. The narrative neither denies nor transcends the void but situates meaning in fragile human connection. Mortality, therefore, is not closure but the very condition of ethical responsibility.

### **Postmodernism and Meta modernism**

Recent critical discourse has articulated the emergence of "meta modernism," an oscillation between postmodern irony and modernist sincerity (Vermeulen and van den Akker 5). Smith's narrative practice exemplifies this hybrid condition. Hanwell illustrates the oscillatory logic of meta modernism. The absurdity echoes postmodern disenchantment, while the avowal of love reintroduces affective investment. The fragment is not abandoned as meaningless but embraced as sufficient. Smith thereby refuses the binary between postmodern skepticism and modernist faith. Her fiction operates in the interstice, where irony and sincerity cohabit, producing what could be termed a metamodern ethic of fragile commitment. The hybridity gestures toward literature's capacity to move beyond postmodern exhaustion without lapsing into naive humanism.

### **Findings and Implications**

The analysis of *Hanwell in Hell* reveals that Smith navigates postmodern strategies while resisting their reductive outcomes. Her narrative enacts fragmentation, irony, intertextuality and temporal disjunction, yet these features are consistently inflected with ethical resonance. Smith exemplifies Hutcheon's paradoxical "complicit critique" while extending it toward metamodern sincerity. Hanwell becomes a figure of the postmodern everyman, embodying alienation and dislocation, yet his endurance dramatizes the possibility of provisional meaning. The text foregrounds how memory, mortality and identity, though destabilized by postmodern conditions, remain sites of ethical negotiation. Her works illustrate that postmodernism, rather than terminating meaning, reconfigures it as contingent, relational and affective. The implications

---

operates at the threshold between postmodernism and meta modernism and that Smith's contribution lies in reasserting the significance of ordinary existence within the very frameworks that deny transcendence. *Hanwell in Hell* is thus not only an exploration of the postmodern condition but a testament to literature's capacity to theorize its own historical moment.

### Conclusion

Thus, *Hanwell to Hell* encapsulates her distinctive postmodern vision, where fragmentation, irony and multiplicity converge to reflect the instability of contemporary life. Through its interplay of memory, mortality and cultural displacement, the narrative illuminates how individuals grapple with fractured identities in late-capitalist society. The paper's analysis demonstrates that Smith resists singular interpretations, instead situating her work within broader debates of diaspora, hybridity and postmodern skepticism. By revealing the fissures between tradition and modernity, certainty and ambiguity, *Hanwell to Hell* underscores her enduring contribution to postmodern literary discourse and its continuing relevance in twenty-first-century cultural criticism.

### Works cited

- Bentley, Nick. *Contemporary British Fiction*. Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
- Childs, Peter. *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction Since 1970*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Eagleton, Robert. *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Head, Dominic. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1991.
- Lane, Richard J. *The Postmodern Novel*. Polity Press, 2013.
- Smith, Zadie. *Hanwell to Hell*. Penguin, 2019.
- Smith, Zadie. *Grand Union*. Penguin, 2019.
- Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*. Penguin, 2000.



---

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*.  
Routledge, 1984.

Tew, Philip. *Zadie Smith*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.