



**Utrecht University**

**Neo-Liberalist Influence on Feminism in Zadie Smith's *NW* and *On Beauty***

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**Abstract**

In the academic literature about Zadie Smith's bibliography, there is a missing perspective that takes into account the influence of neo-liberalism on her novels through a feminist lens. In this thesis, I explore how Zadie Smith has represented this influence in a critical way in her novels *NW* and *On Beauty*. Through close reading I show how the neo-liberal influence is represented, and I explore how this relates to academic theory on the neo-liberal influence and postfeminism. From this analysis I conclude that in academics, careers and personal lives, women in the novels are confronted with different effects of the neo-liberal influence on feminism. I found that this influence has caused a two-fold in women's experience; they believe and are believed to be equal to the men in their society, even though my analysis of the books gives evidence that suggests a remaining gender inequality. Because the novels represent the fictional daily lives in a highly realistic way, this conclusion suggests that not only women in Zadie Smith's novels experience this two-fold, but that it exists in real life as well.

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## Introduction

*‘We are the daughters of the feminists who said, “You can be anything,” and we heard, “You have to be everything.”’* – Courtney Martin (18)

From an ideology where women were radically fighting for their rights, Alison Phipps argues that neo-liberalism has stripped the feminist, radical analysis of gender relations of its credibility, while increasing individualistic aspects of feminism (17). This can be seen in the quote from Martin, taken from her novel *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters* (2007), in the way she describes what she was told by her mother: the radical notions of her ‘being anything’. Yet Martin has received this message as the individualistic notion of ‘having to be everything’.

Six years after the publication of Martin’s novel, Zadie Smith released her novel *NW* (2013). According to Lourdes López-Roperó, this is Smith’s first woman-centred novel (125). While her work before *NW* has been critiqued by some with a lack of character development of female characters (Walters 125), others describe her previous female characters as memorable (López-Roperó 125). With the publication of the female-centred *NW*, Smith opens up an opportunity for a new discourse, one that examines the influence of feminism and neo-liberalism on Smith’s female characters. This thesis will examine not only the woman-centred novel *NW*, but Smith’s earlier novel *On Beauty* (2006) as well.

*On Beauty* is centred around two academic families. The Belsey family, consisting of art history professor Howard, nurse Kiki, and their three children Jerome, Zora and Levi. The family lives in Wellington, a fictional university town nearby Boston. Their rivalling family are the Kipps, with Howard’s colleague Monty, his wife Carlene and their two children Victoria and Michael. The story focusses on themes as race, beauty and the conflict between liberal and conservative values.

*NW* is an experimental novel that follows the stories of Leah Hanwell, Natalie Blake, Felix Cooper and Nathan Bogle. Leah and Natalie are best friends but lead very different lives. While Natalie is ambitious, pursuing a career in law, Leah is content with her administrative job. *NW* focusses on themes as the restructuring of the class system, with ethnicity no longer being a defining factor, the issue of self-examination and different views of the societal pressure of motherhood.

Smith’s bibliography has not gone unnoticed by other scholars. López-Roperó discusses ‘postfeminist subjecthood’ in *NW*, focussing on the manner in which Smith explores contemporary women’s lives (125). Beatriz Pérez Zapata wrote another article focussing on *NW*, arguing that Smith shows ‘the impossibility of being caught between different constructed

subjectivities' in her novel (94). According to López-Ropero other literature has focused mostly on *NW*'s unique style, which she describes as an 'embrace of experimentation and modernist precursors' (125). Colleen Fenno examines *On Beauty* in her article 'Zadie Smith "On Beauty", Youth, and Aging'. Here she discusses the way in which Smith reflects on the importance society places on the appearance of women, with a specific focus on the way the idealisation of youth is represented in the novel (180).

While the aspects these authors discuss echo neo-liberalist elements, such as the focus on subjectivity and beauty, the authors do not bring neo-liberalism into a central focus. For this reason, this thesis adds to the existing literature about Smith's work by adopting a focus on the way neo-liberalism has influenced different aspects of the lives of Smith's characters. My interest is to describe the neo-liberal influence through a feminist lens. The aim is to increase the consciousness of neo-liberal influence on feminism, so female oppression and gender disparity might be illuminated and challenged. Because *NW* and *On Beauty* realistically represent a range of issues an individual might face in western modern society, using these novels for my analysis will aid the understanding of how neo-liberalism might influence feminist issues and concepts. In this thesis, I will therefore answer the question: how do *NW* and *On Beauty* represent the neo-liberal influence on feminism in a critical way?

In the first chapter I discuss the theoretical framework of the thesis. I look at different definitions that are of importance to this thesis and determine which of these definitions is the most relevant. In the second chapter I analyse both *NW* and *On Beauty* with a focus on the influence of neo-liberalism on feminism with regard to the education and professional lives of women. I look at different aspects of the novels and how Smith has represented the problems of neo-liberalism posed by the authors discussed in the theoretical framework. In the third chapter I analyse the way Smith represents the problems found in the theoretical framework about the influence of neo-liberalism on gender performativity and beauty.

## Chapter 1 – Theoretical Framework

To be able to determine what the influence of neo-liberalism on feminism in the context of the United Kingdom and United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been, we must first determine what feminism in this context entails. For this, we must look at the history of western feminism. The way to describe feminist history is, however, just as contested as the definition of feminism. As Rivers notes in her book, feminism has broadly been seen as a consolidated, unified and coherent movement with consistent and universal aims (2). This way of viewing feminism, Rivers argues, is ‘at best romanticized’ and in a less positive light, a way to delegitimize and undermine the women who speak out against such a homogenous definition. In this thesis I will be attentive to the complexities, multiplicities, and nuances of feminist movements and developments. As such, I will be focussing on feminist themes pertinent to the contextual specificity of this thesis.

Pertinent to this thesis as well is an understanding of neo-liberalism. The term neo-liberalism is one that is hard to define, being used to describe a wide range of phenomena (Springer et al. 1). In their book *Handbook of Neoliberalism* Springer et al. argue that the term is widely used to describe anything ‘bad’, from different social processes to institutions and social actors (2). They critique this way of using neo-liberalism and describe their definition of neo-liberalism as containing “new political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility.” (2). As Zadie Smith’s novels focus on personal experiences, this thesis will mainly take into account the role of individual responsibility in neo-liberalism.

When considering the relation between feminism and neo-liberalism, it is crucial to understand the meaning of the term postfeminism. Postfeminism is a movement that is said to have first come into being around 1990 (McRobbie, ‘Post-feminism and Popular Culture’ 255). It is seen as one of the most important, yet at the same time most contested terms of the feminist terminology (Gill 147). Gill and Scharff distinguish four different ways of defining postfeminism in their book *New Femininities*. The first is using postfeminism to ‘signal an epistemological break’ within feminism. In this definition the use of ‘post’ means the feminist movement has changed to challenge hegemonic Anglo-American feminism (Gill and Scharff 3). The second way of defining postfeminism the authors distinguish is the historical shift after feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. This definition positions feminism as something that has passed and is no longer needed (3). A third way the authors describe is defining postfeminism as a backlash against feminism. Scholars that define postfeminism as such see postfeminism as a narrative in which feminism is seen as the cause of a number of problems (Gill 3). The

fourth and last definition of postfeminism takes the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist ideas and defines postfeminism as a sensibility (Gill and Scharff 4). Gill and Scharff use McRobbie's concept of 'double-entanglement' to describe this sensibility. McRobbie argues that postfeminism facilitates both a doing and undoing of feminism (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 12). Allowing for a broader view of postfeminism than the three previous definitions, this last definition of postfeminism is the one that is used throughout this thesis.

McRobbie describes double-entanglement as an acceptance of both neo-conservative values and processes of liberalisation (McRobbie, 'Post-feminism and Popular Culture'). In postfeminism this takes shape in the form of a double movement; women are allowed some rights on the condition that feminism 'fades away' (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 55–56). Post-feminism therefore comes at a cost according to McRobbie. Women get some of the freedoms feminists in the 70s and 80s fought for, in exchange for the solidification of the gender imbalance (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 80). The double-entanglement and double-movement of postfeminism has resulted in a new sexual contract, which has been heavily influenced by neo-liberalism (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 54). McRobbie argues that it has come into being because of a need to reshape the notion of womanhood to fit with emerging neo-liberal social and economic arrangements (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 57). When describing the neo-liberal policies in the UK from the 1980s, McRobbie uses the term 'meritocracy', which has had significant influences on the development of the role of women in society (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 29).

McRobbie describes the way in which the new meritocracy influences the 'fashion-beauty complex', the space of sexuality, fertility and reproduction and the education and employment of women (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 59). She states there is a danger in the way this new sexual contract pretends there is no more inequality between the sexes; it pretends to have taken elements from the feminist movements that came before it, but reshapes these elements to fit in with neo-liberalist values (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 57). In other words, McRobbie links the influence of neo-liberalism to the double-entanglement of postfeminism. This thesis explores how the double-entanglement and the new sexual contract are represented in *NW* and *On Beauty*.

Another key feature of the new neo-liberalist movement is that a woman's success, or her economic prosperity, is based on her enthusiasm for work and having a career (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 58). According to McRobbie, the new requirement of women to work makes that in order to keep women subjected to men, the focus comes to lie not in their economic dependency, but on their appearance (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 61). McRobbie

calls this the ‘postfeminist masquerade’ (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 59). Women are firmly pushed in the direction of independence and self-reliance, and thus in the direction of self-awareness (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 63). With this idea of self-made success comes the idea that women are only successful if they look like it; the appearance of women becomes a ‘performance indicator’ (McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of ‘Resilience’* 17). The cultural goal becomes to be attractive at all times, and above all avoid to be perceived as ‘dowdy’ (McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of ‘Resilience’* 32). Not only are women expected to look ‘good’ at all times, they must perform in the work environment as well. McRobbie argues that the postfeminist new sexual contract maintains a double role for women (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 80). They are not being pushed back into their homes, but working part-time after becoming a mother is made easier by the UK government (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 80). Simultaneously, men are encouraged to become more active fathers, but with the provision that this must be their personal choice. Women are thus expected to remain a willing participant in the economy, while also managing the traditional female role of head of the household. In this, not only the choices a woman makes in her professional life become of importance in her economic status, but the responsibility of finding the right partner who will choose to take equal part in the household as well. If her partner does not want to participate equally in childcare, the woman has simply made the wrong choice, and it is therefore her own fault (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 81).

In the analysis of the novels, it will become clear that the female characters indeed bear the responsibility of the household, while the male characters are more focussed on their careers. While postfeminism as defined by McRobbie argues that feminism is no longer needed because it has been integrated by common sense, she shows that the neo-liberal influence on postfeminism rhetoric has contributed to a greater individual responsibility of women. Since McRobbie emphasises the importance of self-responsibility when it comes to success, and partly links this to beauty ideals, this thesis examines how individual responsibility and the importance of beauty within this is represented in *NW* and *On Beauty*.

The academic field of feminism is complex and divided. This thesis has presented it in relation to the neo-liberal influence. This has been most seen in postfeminism, where it is presented that feminist has been completed and is now irrelevant. Angela McRobbie nonetheless argues that while the new postfeminist sexual contract has incorporated some feminist ideals, it mainly has twisted these ideals to fit with neo-liberal values. Now that the influence of neo-liberalism on feminism has been explained, this theory can be applied to the novels that are subject in this thesis. By bringing together neo-liberalism and feminism, this



thesis can explore a new viewpoint on the lives of the women in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* and *NW*. It is expected that the novels will show different ways neo-liberalism has shaped feminism, specifically in relation to two aspects the new sexual contract has affected the most: work and education, and gender performance and beauty.

## Chapter 2 – Work and Education

In *NW*, Natalie and Leah both attended college and obtained a degree. While Natalie is ambitious and strives to make a career for herself, Leah is content with the job she has. The women face different issues in their respective career lives; a colleague is mistrustful of Leah because of her degree, expecting her to strive for jobs with more status. On the other hand, while Natalie does strive for a higher status job, she is told to be careful and contain herself because she is a woman. The novel seems to show that women are expected to pursue a career, but still remain less successful than their male colleagues. This represents the double-entanglement discussed in chapter one. In the following chapter, I analyse *NW* and *On Beauty* in regard to the influence of neo-liberalism on feminist views of women's careers and education.

### Importance of education and intelligence

As McRobbie argues in her book, one of the results of neo-liberal influence on feminism has been the emphasis on the importance of education. Women being educated is now seen as the norm, McRobbie argues, and within the education system women face enormous pressure to perform. Obtaining a degree is seen as the highest of achievements (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 75). In *On Beauty*, Natalie ponders the significance of her perceived intelligence: “Wasn't it possible that what others mistook for intelligence was in fact only a sort of mutation of the will? [...] She could not help her mutated will. She was unable to glean real satisfaction from accidents.” (Smith, *On Beauty* 178) In this excerpt, Natalie calls attention to the triviality of intelligence. She is praised for her merits and achievements in education but feels no pride about them because she feels she was simply born with the ability to study. This way of thinking goes against the neo-liberal idea that everything can be shaped if one only works hard enough. It has a sense of finality, where your place in the meritocracy is not due to your hard work but instead due to the way you fit in with the education system.

On the other hand, in *On Beauty* the secretary of the dean, Lydia, represents a different point of view: “She had the skills, and skills took you places in Lydia's America.” (Smith, *On Beauty* 150) Lydia is convinced she has the skills she needs to get higher up in her career, and that these skills are the most important thing that will make her success. This way of viewing the world complies with the neo-liberal conviction that everything is possible, if only one works hard. The clash between the two convictions, on one hand the triviality of intelligence according to Natalie, and Lydia's view that skills will get you everywhere, is further represented in *NW*. One of Leah's co-workers, Adina, is mistrustful of her because Leah has a

university degree: “[She] clawed her way up the system. [...] Is wary of those, like Leah, whose degrees have thus installed them. To Adina a university degree was like a bungee cord, lowering in and pulling out with dangerous velocity.” (Smith, *NW* 32) While Adina, like Lydia in *On Beauty*, has relied on her skills to advance in her career, she sees Leah’s university degree as superior. Leah observes that Adina holds Leah’s degree in much higher regard than Leah herself does. This suggests that while the neo-liberal meritocracy could be seen as valuing hard work and skills above all else, in practice education and obtaining a degree is valued even more. Natalie’s indifference when she is praised with her intelligence and her observation that this is no attribute she worked hard for can be interpreted as a comment on the importance that is placed on education. McRobbie argues that this emphasis placed on academic achievement by women keeps gender imbalance intact. In postfeminism, women going to school is not only seen as common sense, but as their duty. According to McRobbie, in the double-entanglement of postfeminism academic achievement has become the new marker of female success (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 75).

### Women as support

As stated in chapter one, with the new sexual contract as McRobbie defines it, it is a woman’s responsibility to pick the right partner (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 81). In *NW*, this aspect of the neo-liberal influence on feminism is mainly seen in the relationship between Natalie and Frank. Natalie is under the impression that she chose the right partner because he encourages her and does not feel threatened by her success: “Only Frank supported her. Only he ever seemed proud. [...] At least Natalie Blake and Frank De Angelis weren’t working against each other, or in competition.” (Smith, *NW* 267) Natalie sees the fact that he supports her choice to work for more corporate clients as vital support that she does not get from anyone else. However, she is still expected to assume the traditional role of a woman in their household. When their second child is born, Natalie observes that “forgetful of practicalities, [she] found she has to treat him as a third child, to be managed and directed along with the rest of them.” (Smith, *NW* 271). And when their nanny falls unexpectedly absent, Natalie is asked to stay home with the children. When he returns home, he tells her: “You’re amazing. I would have just sat around wasting my time, playing with them all day.” (Smith, *NW* 290). This comment suggests that Frank views taking care of his own children as a waste of his time. This situation is an example of McRobbie’s double-entanglement. While Natalie views Frank as a good choice of partner because he supports Natalie’s success, his actions do not seem in line with her assessment. Frank does not seem to value his wife’s career as equal of his and relies on

Natalie to take care of the practicalities of their family. In line with McRobbie's assessment of the new sexual contract, Natalie can be blamed for this outcome. In the new sexual contract, the responsibility of choosing the right (male) partner is the individual responsibility of the woman. In addition to this, the double-entanglement that shaped this new sexual contract has resulted in the idea that there is no more inequality between the sexes. In the relationship between Natalie and Frank it becomes apparent that this perceived equality is not the reality.

The remaining supporting role of women is presented in a different way in *On Beauty*. It can be seen in side-character Carl's assessment of his boss and other women in his life: "She was a calm, patient boss and, like most of the women Carl had come across in his life, was always trying to help him out, covering for him when he messed up." (Smith, *On Beauty* 373). This suggests a male privilege, where Carl is relying on the women in his life to help him solve his problems. This goes against the neo-liberal thought of everyone being responsible for their own choices and actions, and brings to mind the idea of the double-entanglement in postfeminism. Women are perceived to be equal to men, and yet Smith seems to suggest that men are not as responsible for their actions as women. Not only Carl relies on the women in his life; Claire, a colleague of Howard's, claims that "without Kiki, [Howard] couldn't function." (Smith, *On Beauty* 225). Apparently, Kiki supports Howard so much that he would not function in the same manner without her. This suggests that Kiki has a literal supporting role, making sure that her husband's day to day life is taken care of.

In a conversation with Carlene, Kiki asks her whether there were no things Carlene wanted to do herself, apart from her husband. Kiki tries to argue that a relationship should be about enabling the other partner and being enabled in return. Carlene replies that she just wanted to love and be loved (Smith, *On Beauty* 172). This conversation shows that Kiki, like Natalie in *NW*, does not see herself as subjected to her husband. Yet she mentions things she wanted to achieve in her life, and she has not achieved any of those things. Thus, while she sees her relationship with Howard as an equal partnership, it seems that she has enabled him to function and become a professor, while he has not done the same in return.

### Balancing Gender and Work

The women in Smith's novels not only face the remainder of this subjugation in their homelives, but in their professional environments as well. Natalie is assaulted by one of her superiors while she is still a trainee. When she withdraws from the social aspect of her workplace after this incident, she is questioned by female mentor figures. One of them ignores Natalie's attempt to explain, and instead gives her unsolicited advice: "[his] passion, or mine,

or yours, reads as “aggression”. And let me tell you, as a woman it’s worse: “aggressive hysteria”. The first lesson is: turn yourself down. One notch. Two.” (Smith, *On Beauty* 239)

The mentor refers to their shared race, telling Natalie she will be perceived as aggressive for behaving the same way as her white colleagues. Then the mentor emphasises that as a black woman, this is even more true. She advises Natalie to hold herself back, to make herself more palatable to judges and juries. Natalie is first assaulted, and then told to be careful of being too much herself. This shows that woman still hold a difficult position in the workplace, where they are vulnerable to abuse and not seen as equal to their male co-workers. Again, this seems to suggest the presence of the double-entanglement. Women are seen as equal to men because they are allowed to work, but in reality, they face inequality within their work environments.

In the neo-liberal postfeminist ideology, it is important for a woman to remain economically independent from her husband. This means that when she becomes a mother, she has to combine being a mother and maintaining a career. In *On Beauty*, it becomes clear that the female characters are expected to pretend nothing has happened when they return back to work after giving birth. This is first seen in the breakdown of Natalie’s assistant, Melanie: “The fact is I’ve got Rafs and I love her and I don’t want to pretend that I don’t have Rafs any more!” (Smith, *On Beauty* 266). She forces Natalie to acknowledge her child, and while her inner feelings are not expressed directly, her emotional outburst suggests that she felt she had to hide her having a child from Natalie, continuing her work as if nothing had happened. When Natalie returns to work after having her children, she faces the same issue: “Each time she returned to work, the challenge was perfectly clear: make it happen so it seems like it never happened. There was so much written about this phenomenon in the ‘Woman’ section.” (Smith, *On Beauty* 274). The last sentence suggests that Natalie has read articles with advice on balancing working and having children, where it was expressed that it is necessary to pretend like nothing happened. This reflects McRobbie’s argument that women are expected to maintain the same standard as they did before having children, especially in regard to looks.

In this chapter I explored the ways in which neo-liberalism has influenced feminist views of the lives of women and how this influence manifests in *NW* and *On Beauty*. First, I examined the importance that is placed on education and intelligence. I discussed the neo-liberal view that anything can be achieved through hard work, which results in the so-called meritocracy. I described the duality of the importance that the new sexual contract places on education, represented in Natalie’s doubts about her perceived intelligence and Lydia’s conviction about her skills. Secondly, I examined the role the female characters in the novels take in regard to their male counterparts. I discussed the way in which the female characters

perceive their relationships to be an equal partnership, and I analysed situations in which this seems not to be true. These contradicting observations suggest the existence of McRobbie's double-entanglement I discussed in chapter one. The female characters perceive themselves to be equal to their male colleagues and partners, but in the novels they are described facing different situations in which this was not the case. From this can be concluded that while the neo-liberal influence has caused women to be perceived as equal to men, they are in fact held to a higher standard of individual responsibility than men.

### Chapter 3 – Gender Performance and Beauty

A second theme which neo-liberalism has influenced is that of gender performance and beauty. As stated in chapter one, McRobbie argues that the double-entanglement of the new sexual contract has caused a greater focus upon beauty standards. Female success is now measured in how well a woman is able to be 'beautiful', while still achieving success in their careers and homelives as well. In *NW* this is seen in the persisting expectation that women have to have children, and in the insecurity of Natalie when she encounters her more beautiful cousin. In *On Beauty* it is expressed how much power beauty gives a woman, and in which ways that might influence her life. In this chapter, I analyse how the influence of neo-liberalism has been represented in *NW* and *On Beauty* in regard to gender performance and beauty.

#### Gendered expectations

In the very first few pages of *NW*, it becomes clear to the reader that Leah is expected to have children by her mother: "On what front? -On the Grandma front. The ticking time front." (Smith, *NW* 18) Leah expresses indifference on repeated reminders of her apparent infertility. When her husband raises the issue, she observes: "Leah is ageing in dog years. Her thirty-five is seven times his." (Smith, *NW* 20) She does not contribute much to the conversation, letting her husband worry over her body and age. This detachment is shown again in a conversation with friends: "Isn't it your turn soon? Michel takes that one. His topic, his realm. A conversation begins about the inside of Leah's body, and how, if Michel had been listened to, it would have been far busier these past few years." (Smith, *NW* 65) Leah leaves herself out of the conversation, even though it is about her body. She does not express that she does not want to have children. This seems to be because she blames herself for not realising earlier that this was to be expected of her by her husband: "A thirty-five-year-old woman married had most certainly been warned, should be paying attention, should be listening." (Smith, *NW* 25) This conveys that Leah thinks she should have thought of it earlier, and that she blames herself for not having the conversation about having children. As a result, she has a secret abortion and starts to take stolen anticonception pills. Natalie too feels pressure to have children: "they were of the belief that people were willing them to reproduce." (Smith, *NW* 268) This shows that both Natalie and Leah feel societal pressure to have children; not only from their husbands or mothers, but from undefined 'people'. Leah's secret abortion and birth control suggest that she feels so much pressure from her environment that she does not feel comfortable expressing her true feelings; that she does not want children. This controversial opinion is complicated by her marriage to a man who has a strong wish for children. Leah's predicament shows that while a

neo-liberal society suggests that everyone is free to make their own choices, there is still a strong expectation on women to conform to the norm of bearing children. This again suggests the presence of McRobbie's double-entanglement. Gender imbalance is seen as something of the past, and women are expected to have individual responsibility over their lives. Yet the remaining pressure upon women to have children suggests otherwise.

### Insecurity of women

In McRobbie's assessment of the new sexual contract discussed in chapter one, she describes an increased focus on women's appearance in order to keep them subjected to the patriarchy. In *NW*, this is reflected in the insecurity Natalie feels when confronted with her cousin Tonya. "Despite the toddler and the baby in her double buggy, Tonya retained the proportions of a super-heroine in a comic book. Natalie meanwhile was sadly [skinny.]" (Smith, *NW* 243) Even though in meritocracy terms Natalie is the more successful of the two, having gone to university and practicing law, she feels inadequate when confronted with her more attractive cousin. This suggests that Natalie feels that her appearance matters more than her achievements. This feeling would confirm McRobbie's argument; in order to keep women subordinate to men now that they are allowed to be economically independent, the patriarchy has made looks more important than their economic success.

As can be expected from the title of the novel, Zadie Smith's characters in *On Beauty* experience this pressure as well. Kiki reflects on her daughter: "This was why she dreaded having girls; she knew she couldn't protect them from self-disgust [...] It was in the air, the hatred of women and their bodies." (Smith, *On Beauty* 197) Here it becomes clear that Kiki is aware of the pressure women feel on their appearance, and that she feels she cannot do anything about it. The value of appearance is emphasised in relation to food as well. First, in a dinner with Claire's poetry class: "Then came the girls. Daisy ordered a starter (an old trick of Claire's youth); Zora ordered the fish without the rice. 'Just the salad please, thank you.'" (Smith, *On Beauty* 216) While the men order what they like, the women in the group feel pressure to order a healthy meal, lest they appear uninterested in their looks. This relation between beauty and food is repeated when there is a formal event: "At the very first formal of the year, the tremendous will-power of female students is revealed [...] this demonstration of pure will is attributed to 'femininity' – that most passive of virtues." (Smith, *On Beauty* 341) The narrator describes how the female students starve themselves through the Christmas period in order to look good for their formal. Through the narrator, Smith comments on the societal view of this behaviour. It is seen as feminine, not worthy of praise. Even though the neo-liberal society as



described by McRobbie requires women to care deeply about their appearance, the act of doing so is seen as unworthy of note. This possibly fuels the insecurity of women even more; even though they do as they are taught by society, they are seen as weak for doing so. In the double-entanglement McRobbie describes, the performance of gender in regards to beauty standards is presented as a personal choice; women are free to dress however they like. In reality though, she argues, the increased importance of beauty standards is used to keep women insecure and less threatening to the patriarchy (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 61).

### Significance of beauty

In addition to the increased insecurity of women, the emphasis society places on female appearance has other effects as well. In *On Beauty*, an important theme is the significance of being beautiful as a woman. This is first represented in a remark made by Carlene: “And men become very absolute about pretty girls [...] if they can’t possess them they get angry and bitter. I’m glad I wasn’t ever pretty.” (Smith, *On Beauty* 171) Here she shows her view of the effect of beautiful women on men. Even though being beautiful is widely regarded as something positive, something for women to strive to achieve, Carlene expresses she is glad she was never beautiful. This suggests that while it is seen as a goal, being pretty is not a completely positive trait. Kiki remarks that she thinks “any woman who counts on her face is a fool.” (Smith, *On Beauty* 173) This reinforces the idea that while society requires women to try to be beautiful, actually achieving this ideal has negative consequences.

On the other hand, Jerome states that “It’s a powerful thing, you know, to look like that.” (Smith, *On Beauty* 241) He suggests that it gives the girl he is talking about a certain amount of power, and that she does not yet know what to do with it. In return his sister argues that the girl is using this power ‘for evil’. Interestingly, all characters note the significance of beauty, but while the female characters express a negative attitude towards this significance, the male characters view it as a positive attribute. Jerome is not the only male character who expresses this view; Erkensine, one of Howard’s colleagues and friends, does the same. He says that “Boys these days are lucky [...] girls know how to use their bodies. They understand their own power.” (Smith, *On Beauty* 345) Before making this statement, he expresses his wish to take possession of Victoria, the beautiful girl Jerome was talking about. He is both an example of Carlene’s statement that men become possessive about pretty girls, and the awed attitude men in Smith’s novel have towards beautiful women.

In contrast, the influence of extreme ugliness is also mentioned in *On Beauty*. A student, Katie, reflects that a painting portraying a “misshapen woman” is seen as very gruesome:

“everyone finds it technically good but visually disgusting. Many famous men are repulsed. A simple naked woman is apparently much more nauseating than [someone] having his eye gouged out.” (Smith, *On Beauty* 251) This indicates that while beauty elicits a strong reaction in men, ugliness does too. While McRobbie’s view on neo-liberalist feminism suggests that the idea that women have to strive for beauty is used to suppress these women, *On Beauty* suggests that there is power to be found in beauty. On the other hand, Carlene’s statement can be interpreted as a warning that there is a danger in using this power.

As we can see from these examples, there remains pressure upon the female characters in *NW* and *On Beauty* to conform to expectations of gender performance and beauty. While *On Beauty* suggests that women can gain power from using their beauty to their advantage, there are more examples in the novel that suggest that beauty ideals are being used to suppress women. In relation with McRobbie’s view of postfeminism, where she identifies a double-entanglement in the new sexual contract, the pressure of these expectations is used to keep women subjected to the patriarchy, while suggesting that the gender imbalance is something of the past.

## Conclusion

*‘We are the daughters of the feminists who said, “You can be anything,” and we heard, “You have to be everything.”’* – Courtney Martin (18)

Courtney Martin’s quote addresses the feeling of ‘having to do it all’ as a woman. While the double-entanglement described in chapter one suggests that gender imbalance is something of the past, this quote suggests that women still feel a pressure to perform that is greater than that of men. Daughters were taught by their mothers that they now had every opportunity and took that to mean that they have to prove they deserve this privilege. In this thesis, I have attempted to discern how *NW* and *On Beauty* represent the neo-liberal influence on feminism in a critical way. In the first chapter I discussed Angela McRobbie’s view that the neo-liberal influence on postfeminism has resulted in a new sexual contract where the notion of womanhood was redefined to fit with neo-liberal social and economic arrangements. In the following chapters I examined *NW* and *On Beauty* to determine how they represent the elements of this new sexual contract McRobbie describes.

In chapter two I analysed elements of the novels that are connected to women’s careers and education. I found that while the female characters perceive themselves to be equal to the male characters, they are described in different situations that suggest there is still a gender imbalance. I linked this to McRobbie’s theory of double-entanglement, in which she argues that in the new sexual contract gender imbalance is seen as something that has been solved. From this I concluded that the neo-liberal influence has caused women to be seen as equal to men, while in reality this might not be true.

In chapter three I focussed on elements of the new sexual contract that relate to gender performance and beauty, and how these elements were represented in *NW* and *On Beauty*. I concluded that while women under the new sexual contract are seen as having full autonomy over their choices, in reality they are still pressured to conform to certain expectations of gender performance and beauty ideals. I concluded that in the light of McRobbie’s theory of double-entanglement, it can be argued that this pressure is used to keep women under control of the patriarchy.

Through the analysis of these two novels, it has become apparent how the neo-liberal influence on feminism has shaped the lives of women in different ways. Even though the novels are fictional, they present daily life in a highly realistic way. Especially *NW* gives a realistic and insightful overview of the female inner experience. Both novels however represent aspects

of the new sexual contract in this very realistic way, and therefore might contribute to more public awareness of the influence of neo-liberalism on the female experience.

However, this thesis does not comment on the importance of race in regard to the influence of neo-liberalism on feminism. McRobbie stresses that while all women are influenced by the phenomena she describes, women of different backgrounds have different experiences. She mentions that both beauty standards and educational standards might influence Asian and black women more than it might white women. Since including this would have made the scope of this thesis too large, a more detailed analysis of the same novels on how race might influence the issues discussed here could prove further useful insights.

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