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But I am aware, at least as a reader, that remarkable acts of art-making – bold, perverse, unbeholden, free – have had the side effect of changing the weather in a country, in a people, at a certain historical moment, and finally in me, conferring freedoms for which I am now very grateful. (Zadie Smith 2018, *Feel Free*: 342)

1. Introduction

1.1. Relevance of the Topic

It is a tendency of our times to smile at students of literature, appreciating their interest in reading, but doubting that their field of interest can contribute to society's urgent need for innovation when it comes to dealing with crises and social inequalities. However, literature can certainly be an important starting point for change. Therefore, it would be wrong to exclude literary examination of various forms of struggle from our contemporary reality. Works of fiction have the potential to reach an audience and arouse their interest in social phenomena, and they might eventually influence their future actions, for example by questioning dominant narratives of how to live. It can thus be said that literature possesses enormous power, consequently, works of fiction should not be excluded from the analysis of social circumstances. The present thesis thus has the intention to approach a current social problem, which is inequality, and more precisely, inequality between men and women, by means of applying a theoretical framework – heterodox feminist economics – to the literary analysis of *NW*, a contemporary novel by the British author Zadie Smith, which was published in 2012.

Combining art and culture with political economics appears particularly important to me in an academic environment which is often characterized by the sharp separation between the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. In reality, however, all these branches are interrelated, and it seems to be wrong to exclude the so-called soft sciences such as the humanities from the research interest of natural sciences and economics. In fact, this is another result of “neoliberal conditions of competition”, which “have aided and abetted divergence between humanities and social sciences rather than encouraging the fields to mutually reinforce their shared foundations of moral philosophy” (Kennedy 2020: 264). I am of the opinion that the analysis of a socio-economic topic from a humanities perspective can lead to important insights with regards to how social realities are dealt with in works of fiction. Such an approach to a current social problem might help those of us relate to it who are not too interested in graphs and figures, or maybe not good enough to decipher them, literature being “an effective bridge across the divide between the ivory tower and civil society” (Kennedy 2020: 260). This is in line with Melissa Kennedy's concept of “imaginary economics” and their importance: “As

economics is a narrative of human interaction, invented and imagined into being with the help of figurative language and dominant story tropes, literary studies' interpretative and critical approaches open new ways of framing and engaging with economic criticism" (Kennedy 2020: 158). Kennedy further demands the collaboration of literature and economics "to figure and reconfigure our present and potential imagined communities" (Kennedy 2020: 163).

At this point, it has to be admitted that the present thesis will not focus on statistic data concerning issues of social reproduction. Novels, instead of facts and figures, help readers understand complex economic structures through the ways characters feel, act and behave. Thus, the main aim of this thesis is to illustrate issues of social reproduction found by means of a close reading of *NW* and to demonstrate that Zadie Smith engages with many of the theoretical aspects of heterodox feminist economics. Therefore, a further objective of this thesis is to point out the importance of the humanities and arts and culture in general and to criticize their marginalization in school and academia (cf. Kennedy 2020: 168). Moreover, this thesis is in line with the assumption that it is the responsibility of literature, as well as that of academia, teachers and citizens to represent and respond to inequality (cf. Kennedy 2020: 259).

Whereas several scholars have dedicated research to Smith's oeuvre and her novel *NW*, economic analyses have rarely focused on and related to the two female protagonists, nor have their personal crises been analysed from a feminist economics perspective and focused on social reproduction. This is in line with a conclusion by Brigitte Jirku and Stephanie Wöhl, who state that hardly any analysis of literature discusses the economic situation of migrants, women or society in general (Jirku; Wöhl 2016: 31). Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to the few feminist sociological and economist approaches to literature and to emphasize their importance.

1.2. Outline

As the introduction of my thesis has aimed to emphasize, economics, society and culture are closely related. Existing inequalities, such as those between men and women, which form the core research interest of the present paper, might be depicted in works of fiction. This is important, as culture and literature help their audience to better understand the world they are living in. Thus, I would argue that literature might form the connection between social structures and the individual. This I will try to argue in my analysis of *NW*, which will be conducted by means of a heterodox feminist economic reading of the novel. Through a literary

analysis of Smith's novel, this thesis criticizes the hegemony of neoliberalism and its negative impact on society as a whole and on women in particular. Additionally, it illustrates the concept of social reproduction by means of relating this theory to literary examples found in *NW*.

This thesis starts with a review of the theoretical framework of interest for the discussion of *NW*, i.e. neoliberalism and its critique by heterodox feminist economics, the latter proposing social reproduction as an alternative to our current economics' limited focus on measurable productivity. Moreover, the potential of fiction when it comes to pointing out social problems as well as introducing alternative ways of living is discussed, the concept of imaginary economics is introduced in this section. In the final part of the theoretical background, the context relevant for the current approach to *NW* will be of interest, for example Zadie Smith's own critique of neoliberalism as well as the results of research relating the novel to neoliberalism and politics of austerity. In the literary analysis of *NW*, the various meanings of the concept of social reproduction are discussed and illustrated by references to and examples from the novel. Moreover, social reproduction is related to problematic aspects of neoliberalism. Throughout the close reading of *NW*, attention is also focused on the potential of the novel (for example drawing attention to the downsides of neoliberalism), as well as its lack of imagination when it comes to proposing alternatives for its characters, which will support the general critique of neoliberalism in this thesis.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism being the economic and social framework of our times, it is omnipresent in the world of *NW*. In contrast to what we might think, the dominant economic model of a society is in large way responsible for how our lives look, as the close reading of *NW* will later demonstrate. In order to better understand what the enormous influence of neoliberalism implies, this section aims to explain the core elements of this form of economics.

Neoliberalist ideology is associated with the belief in the supremacy of economic growth – measured in GDP –, which – so the assumption – will automatically result in human progress, the freedom of markets and the power of free trade and capital (Britannica.com). Typical features of neoliberalism are the state deregulation of markets, privatization, a reduction of established state welfare institutions, the accumulation of private wealth, the importance of competition in all aspects of life, politics of austerity, augmented biopolitical control of citizens, the “redefinition of individuals as quantum of human capital rather than subjects of interior development or political representation”, as well as the financialization of everyday life (Deckard; Shapiro 2019: 2). Whereas the promises of neoliberalism focused on the augmentation of wealth, increasing levels of employment, a stable democracy and free movement of people and capital, it has largely resulted in rising unemployment and inequality, exploitation, a retreat of the state and ecological destruction (Mies; Federici 2014: xxi).

The increasing level of inequality, also in the most-developed countries of the world, shows that neoliberalism does not “regulate, distribute and promote economic and social advancement” in a way including all parts of the world or even of a national population (Kennedy 2017: 2). Whereas modern European welfare states were established and extended in the period after World War II, the retreat of the welfare state, which many of these European states are currently facing, goes back to political decisions of the 1970s:

[Reagan’s and Thatcher’s] response to the 1970s’ slowing growth, unpredictable inflation, and solidifying Cold War polemics was to deregulate the market and minimise state intervention under the premise that the market’s natural self-regulation was more efficient, objective, and devoid of political ideology.
(Kennedy 2017: 158)

The fact that within a nation, particular groups are more severely threatened to suffer from inequality and poverty is a proof that neoliberalism is not objective and without an ideology.

In fact, the belief in the responsibility of each individual to succeed professionally and financially by means of meritocracy which is at the centre of neoliberalism proves that issues such as gender inequality and institutionalised racism are often neglected or even denied. With the withdrawal of the state from its earlier role of policy making in the interests of the people, it is today up to culture and literature to point out the underlying bias of neoliberal discourses.

In spite of cultural attempts to point out the social dilemmas caused by the doctrines of capitalism, at the beginning of the 21st century, the dominance of neoliberalism has been largely unquestioned and widely accepted; this “regime of accumulation” has, however, gained notoriety with the advent of the financial crisis (Deckard; Shapiro 2019: 1). The post-2008 Financial Crisis environment is the context in which Smith’s *NW* was written, which is why it captures these economic conditions and presents its boundaries, as the later close reading of the novel will point out. As the world economy is “facing one crisis after another”, pessimism towards this economic order is increasing, people live in insecurity, leading to negative psychological and sociological consequences (Mies; Federici 2014: xxiii). Neoliberal politics have helped realize a deregulation of work, resulting in many employees and labourers working under precarious conditions with regards to their work schedule, their remuneration and/or social security and insurance (Michalitsch 2005: 41). In the United Kingdom, an austerity programme was introduced by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat government in 2010, thus “making the average citizen responsible for the failures of the financial system” instead of changing the structural conditions which have caused the crisis (Fischer; Stedman 2020: 7f.). This is in line with the core belief of capitalism and neoliberalism that individuals are responsible for their own well-being, which has increased due to the retreat of the welfare state due to austerity programmes following the financial crisis.

As mainstream neoclassical economics is in accordance with the dominant economic framework, alternative approaches are needed. Feminist heterodox economics is such an alternative approach to economics, as it attempts to point out the disastrous downsides of neoliberalism, as well as its bias. Notably, feminist economics contradict the orthodox viewpoint of economics as being objective, and show how women and the sphere of reproduction are excluded from common definitions of the economy. In the following section, the main ideas of feminist economics, which are relevant for the discussion of social reproduction, are presented. As a novel featuring two female protagonists and told through their

points of view, *NW* presents itself as a suitable text to relate feminist economics to a literary analysis.

2.2. Feminist Economics

Focusing on economics when approaching inequality is fruitful, as, according to Gabriele Michalitsch, economics is a manifestation of power, for example the power relation between men and women (Michalitsch 2019: uni:view). This relation is one of the core interests of feminist economics, a branch of heterodox, non-mainstream economics. Economics thus is under critical scrutinization of feminist economics, as it largely determines our way of living (Michalitsch 2019: uni:view). Current fields of interest of feminist economics are the retreat of the welfare state and how it impacts on women, as well as the neoliberal deregulation of the job market and the informalization of employment, since it is primarily women who are faced with precarious employment situations (Michalitsch 2019: uni:view). In addition, social reproduction, and in particular the separation into paid and unpaid work including its consequences, is a main field of research of feminist economics (Michalitsch 2019: uni:view). Tony Lawson defines feminist economics to be concerned with the “position of women [...] within society and the economy” (Lawson 2005: 19). This definition of feminist economics emphasizes the contrast between the former and standard, neoclassical economics. Whereas the interest of neoclassical economics is limited and tends to exclude social systems effected by economics, feminist economics recognizes the interrelatedness of economics, society and individuals. In contrast to feminist economics, which is concerned with the well-being of people and therefore interested in the creation of a life and human friendly economic system, the opposite is true for neoliberalism:

Current neoliberalism establishes the idea of competition as a guiding principle of society, thereby enhancing gender inequality and marginalisation. The neoliberal notion of competition is based on neoclassical theory, whose implicit masculinity arises from assumptions of autonomy, rationality, self-interest, and individual utility-maximization related to the concept of homo economicus. The neoclassical model of competition is therefore not gender neutral, but androcentric, constructing competition according to the idea of ‘man fighting man’. (Michalitsch 2003: 73)

The preceding quotation emphasizes why our current dominant economic framework is not gender neutral: Its point of reference is the so-called homo economicus, an autonomous, rational and self-interested male individual whose main motivation is maximizing his profits. Women do not stand a chance in the competition for profit maximization, as they are the primary

caretakers of their families and earn less than their male competitors. Moreover, characteristics which are normally attributed to women, such as emotionality, altruism, weakness, empathy for others, love and the pursuit of love and beauty for their own sake, reciprocity, care and a sense of family find no place in the neoclassical model of the rational homo economicus (Michalitsch 2003: 77; Benería: 118). Therefore, neoliberalism leaves no room for the femina economica (Michalitsch 2006: 7).

By excluding soft values such as emotionality, altruism and weakness and focusing on rational choices taken by a selfish homo economicus under the pretence of objectivity, universality and neutrality, neoclassical theory legitimizes its lack of consideration of relations of power, norms, values or interdependencies with regards to our economic system (Michalitsch 2003: 76). This leads to the hegemony of neoliberal discourses, neglecting mechanisms such as exclusion and marginalisation and consequently making individuals responsible for their success or their failure (Michalitsch 2006: 7).

Neoliberalism is particularly harmful to women because it excludes people who are not able to compete, and due to the double burden of carrying the main responsibility for the physical and psychological well-being of their families and succeeding in the realm of official labour, women are disadvantaged competitors; competitiveness already having permeated all aspects of our lives, from the private to the public (Michalitsch 2003: 73). The increasing retreat of the welfare state assigns responsibilities which were in the past taken by the state to individuals, leading to an increase of – mainly female – obligations (Michalitsch 2003: 73).

In the neoliberal race for individual (economic) success, women take an underprivileged position for another reason, which is (life) time. As opposed to men, their bodies can be regarded as labour power, and their reproductive span is limited – more so than that of men –, resulting in the predominantly female struggle of combining reproductive labours and gainful employment, in addition to reaching personal fulfilment, which many see in having a family (Felber et al.: 198ff.).

Furthermore, 98% of global capital is in the possession of men, it can thus be said that not only capitalism, but also capital is male (Felber et al.: 195). As wealth generated from capital grows faster than wealth generated from income, the predominantly male owners of capital have an enormous economic competitive advantage over those who try to achieve wealth through work, which shows that the neoliberal idea of meritocracy is – to a high degree – a myth.

A concern of heterodox feminist economics is to include unpaid labour in economic considerations, which is in contrast to the neoliberal system, which regards economics as everything directly related to the market, in spite of the fact that the literal meaning of the Greek word *oikos* is household (Michalitsch 2003: 78). Thus, a new definition of economics which includes unpaid labour – and thus the so far unpaid elements of social reproduction – is urgently needed. This need for a new definition of economics is well-explained in a quotation taken from Silvia Federici which also includes the revolutionary aspect underlying such a redefinition of economics:

If the house is the *oikos* on which the economy is built, then it is women, historically the house-workers and house prisoners, who must take the initiative to reclaim the house as a centre of collective life, one traversed by multiple people and forms of cooperation, providing safety without isolation and fixation, allowing for the sharing and circulation of community possessions, and above all providing the foundation for collective forms of reproduction. (Federici 2012: 147)

As this section has emphasized, neoliberalism is critiqued by feminist economics in many ways. As economics is never neutral, but based on the creation of inequalities and power relations, these latter need to be made visible in order for us to consciously think about them and get involved in the alteration of these oppressive conditions. In the following section, the focus will be on the feminist concept of social reproduction.

2.3. Social Reproduction

In order to introduce the idea of social reproduction explored in *NW*, this section relates feminist economics and its points of critique as well as its propositions for a change in the consideration of economics to this concept. The most essential aspect of heterodox economics is that it points out the bias of economics and its depiction of economics as establishing relations of power which create winners and losers. Feminist economics is an important branch of non-orthodox economics because frequently, it is women who are excluded by the dominant competitive economic system. Being aware of the fact that systems are interdependent and that economics cannot be separated from other pillars of society such as households and what happens in them is a prerequisite for discussing the sociological term social reproduction. This interdependence is clearly visible in Smith's novel through the characters – in particular the two female protagonists – in their life choices, their interactions with each other and in their personal crises.

The term social reproduction has a long history, it was coined by Marx and is still used today, though not without criticism. This thesis is in line with the feminist criticism of Marx's term, that is, with his classification of social reproduction as being non-productive. Unfortunately, Marx did not mention women, domestic labour or procreation in his considerations (Federici 2012: 93f.). Reproductive labour can certainly be classified as productive:

Had Marx recognized that capitalism must rely on both an immense amount of unpaid domestic labour for the reproduction of the workforce, and the devaluation of these reproductive activities in order to cut the cost of labour power, he may have been less inclined to consider capitalist development as inevitable and progressive. (Federici 2012: 92)

Therefore, the use of the term reproduction in this thesis should be understood as including both, elements of production and elements of reproduction (Knoblauch 2019: 120). The former might refer to doing housework (which would, if included, contribute immensely to a nation's GDP), the latter could be related to the emotional care work needed by individuals in order to feel fit for the following workday (thus reproducing work capacity). The concept of social reproduction should be used in order to widen our common understanding of economic productivity, which is currently limited, since it focuses exclusively on the production of goods and services in order to generate wealth on the markets (Knoblauch 2019: 125). Social reproduction should thus be seen as the basis of economic thinking and acting (Knoblauch 2019: 125).

Federici considers reproduction as "the analytic category best fit to think a complex web of social and gender relations" (Federici 2018: 1391). She claims the Feminist Movement of the 1970s as having achieved to uncover "[...] the sphere of reproductive activities as the main ground on which, in capitalism, gender relations are constructed and the exploitation of women's labour is realized" (Federici 2018: 1391). Apart from thematizing social and cultural taboos surrounding female sexuality, the Feminist Movement intended to challenge the gendered division of labour (Mies; Federici: 31). It is shocking to see that to this day, the dichotomy of paid and unpaid labour, with all its disadvantageous implications, has not been transgressed.

Since social reproduction comprises paid and unpaid, mostly – but not exclusively – domestic work, a major difficulty is defining what exactly is included in this sociological term. As Federici states, it is much more than "simply cleaning the house" and "having children", and

embraces “physical, emotional and sexual care” as well as ensuring that in the future, offspring will “perform in the ways expected of them under capitalism” (Federici 2012: 31). She explains that social reproduction in general may be understood as “the complex of activities and relations by which our life and labour are daily reconstituted” (Federici 2012: 5).

In spite of the blurriness of the term, Federici has formulated a definition of social reproduction, relating the concept primarily to the realm of domestic labour, which can be of both, physical and psychological nature. Federici’s definition will be used in the present paper too, and in some ways be extended; the last area of her definition of social reproduction, i.e. agricultural activities, will not play a role in my thesis. According to Federici,

[b]y ‘reproduction’ or better by reproductive work I refer to the complex of activities, relations and institutions that in capitalism produce and reproduce labour-power that is people’s capacity to work. These include domestic work, child-raising, sex work as well as subsistence forms of farming that in many countries are an integral part of housework. (Carlin; Federici 2014: 4)

As the points enlisted show, social reproduction refers to all activities which ensure the existence and functioning of society, which is why the concept – albeit often excluded from economic considerations – is of central importance to our lives. Moreover, social reproduction can be seen as the reproduction of social expectations and discourses by individuals. It follows that in order for society to change, the way social reproduction looks like, as well as the importance granted to it, have to be altered.

As we know, women are the main agents of social reproduction – and it is only women who can give birth, which always assigns them the role of reproduction – the concept is thus mainly related to women. It is troubling that work of social reproduction is generally not highly valued by our modern, neoliberalist societies, which can be seen in the fact that nowadays, it is considered bizarre if a woman decides to stay at home with her offspring and not return to her job after maternity leave. However, according to Federici, domestic work is “the central site for the reproduction of the basic conditions of everyday life” (Carlin; Federici 2014: 1) and for this reason alone should be highly valued. Federici explains that reproductive work is shaped by “the logic of capitalist production”, and therefore, domestic, family and sexual relations are “relations of production”, as they are reproducing labour power (Carlin; Federici 2014: 4). The fact that social reproduction is an integral part of the relations of production explains the capitalistic need to control female bodies and their capacity to reproduce (Carlin; Federici 2014:

5). “[...] the production of human beings is the foundation of every economic and political system, and [...] the immense amount of paid and unpaid domestic work done by women in the home is what keeps the world moving” (Federici 2012: 2). Federici’s statement emphasizes the importance of social reproduction, the significance she coins to this sector of work nevertheless appears grotesque when compared to how society perceives it and which occupations are highly esteemed. This is most likely due to the fact that in spite of housework and the family being “pillars of capitalist production” (Federici 2012: 31) their existence and maintenance have been naturalized to a degree which upon questioning would render them bizarre. Unpaid social reproduction also tends to be neglected because in the neoliberal world we are inhabiting, work that does not earn money is not considered important. Family and social relations have been “subordinated to the relations of production”, largely without us noticing it (Federici 2012: 35).

Whereas the aim of this theoretical section has been to give core information of the term social reproduction, its history and the aspects it comprises, the literary analysis of *NW* will apply these theoretical assumptions of social reproduction to the examination of the novel and by doing so illustrate the many aspects it contains, as well as highlighting social criticism in *NW*, which is expressed to a large part through the depiction of inequalities between men and women and the struggles of the latter due to these disparities and social expectations. In addition, critique of *NW* will be uttered, as the novel does not propose alternatives to the dominant, harmful lifestyle it brilliantly depicts. Thus, in the literary analysis, the following aspects of social reproduction will be applied to the novel: female fertility, sexuality and the importance of time, male versus female values as well as paid and unpaid labour, the myth of meritocracy and individualism as well as the problematic consequences it often entails, and the fact that adapting to neoliberal expectations often is the only way to live for women. It goes without saying that not all aspects of social reproduction featured in *NW* can be discussed, nor that my definition of the sociological concept is all-encompassing. However, the aim is to present the main idea of the concept – as interpreted by me – by means of literary examples. In order to better understand the social activism expressed in *NW*, as well as to have some points of critique in mind before the literary analysis, the following section shows why literature helps us to better understand social conditions and might be a starting point to change certain deplorable states by means of narrating alternatives.

2.4. Power of Literature

The idea of economies as real fictions invites a less obvious approach and more variety, an analysis against the grain. (Fischer; Stedman 2020: 9)

Since neoliberalism has permeated all societies of the Global North, literature presents itself as an opportunity to concentrate on the “cultural or ideological symptoms of neoliberalism as they are experienced in post-Fordist core nation states of Europe and America” (Deckard; Shapiro: 3). Whereas critiques of neoliberalism tend to focus on policies and economics, arts and humanities can “examine how culture plays a constitutive role in generating and stabilizing the socioeconomic relations on which neoliberal hegemony depends” (Deckard; Shapiro: 3). In addition, culture, and in particular literature, can illustrate different perceptions of neoliberalism, depending on the individual involved (Deckard; Shapiro: 4). Fiction set in neoliberal societies can serve to express the pessimism in not being able to change things for the better, as “[t]he general mood in Western societies is pessimistic – if not depressive” (Mies; Federici 2014: xxi). *NW*, being set in post-crisis London and featuring personae suffering from increasing inequalities – be it due to gender, ethnicity, postcode and often various of these resulting in intersectionality – presents itself as an example par excellence for an analysis and discussion of fiction depicting neoliberal societies and drawing the readers’ attention to the most disfavoured.

Society’s augmented interest in the deplorable state of affairs caused by the neglect of the needs of the people and the environment in favour of the benefit of the wealthiest and thus most powerful is manifested in the publication of “pop-economics books” – Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* is a well-known example – published after the financial crisis which did not only concern the finance sector, but, with the retreat of the welfare state, has had an impact on the day-to-day life of ordinary people (Kennedy 2017: 161). A range of films such as *The Wolf of Wall Street*, depicting the life of the careless one percent was released too, old classics such as *The Great Gatsby* experienced a revival: “[...] the public interest in various forms of narrativization of the financial crisis – in fiction, non-fiction, film, and documentary – indicates the importance of cultural expression in making sense of the economy’s role in society” (Kennedy 2017: 2f.). According to Kennedy, this use of literary fiction in order to illustrate economic conditions “taps into a common language and set of references with a general Western readership [...] function[ing] as shorthand for describing economic behaviour and attitudes, replacing difficult economic jargon with educational

entertainment” (Kennedy 2020: 264). As economics is often not comprised in general education, economic narratives have the potential to appeal to a broad audience who would otherwise not understand the interdependency between economic conditions and (social) crises. In addition, fiction is an important and suitable means to explain social conditions because unlike a presentation of pure figures, readers of fiction are likely to “engage personally and imaginatively” in the narrations they are presented with, as they appeal to the readers’ emotions (Kennedy 2017: 4).

Kennedy refers to economic narratives as “imaginary economics” (Kennedy 2020: 158). By narrating the impacts our ruling economic system has on individuals, in the case of *NW*, this is primarily women torn between fulfilling mainstream expectations of private and professional success, the novel illustrates the limits and downsides of hegemonic discourses of a successful life, in particular for women and people on the margin of highly neoliberal societies. “Imaginary economics” and its importance is closely related to people being in need of narratives in order to make sense of the world. This is also true for the shock following the global financial crisis of 2008, as well as its consequences and the longstanding – and still enduring – conditions having caused it. Rising levels of inequality are a widely discussed problem, and, unfortunately, there is no sign of any change in this development (Kennedy 2017: 3). Inequality does not exclusively mean that the gap between the rich and poor is widening, but also that between genders and ethnicities. The literary analysis of *NW* will illustrate how economic pressure and the ongoing retreat of welfare institutions reinforces mechanisms of exclusion, as the novel depicts struggles of marginalized characters, for example with regards to finding a job and being treated respectfully.

Neoliberalism is often depicted in literature as a reflection on the present reality which might be called “passion for the real” (Hartley 2019: 133). A common theme in literature depicting neoliberal reality is alienation and identity loss due to the depersonalization many individuals experience in our modern world (Hartley 2019: 134). Regarding work-ethics, neoliberalist principles have penetrated into the most private lives of individuals, as people become “small enterprises” trying to maximize their profits, for example through personal relationships (Hartley 2019: 137). Works aware of the shortcomings of the neoliberal economic system feature a variety of personae of capitalism, from the upper classes to wage laborers (Hartley 2019: 141). These personae of capitalism are also found in *NW* – mostly, it appears, to contrast the apparent winners and losers of the dominant system. However, occasionally, their paths do

cross and it becomes obvious that the characters face serious struggles, no matter whether they have achieved success or whether they are living on the margin of society. Nevertheless, it is only the fortunate characters of *NW* who always can rely on their social and familial network and are thus able to escape the crises they are confronted with relatively unharmed.

Another problem linked to neoliberalism is the fuzziness of the actual meaning of the term (Kennedy 2017: 156). It is true that most of us use it leisurely without being able to give an exact definition of the word, which might not even exist. This is another reason why we need works of literature illustrating our dominating economic system in order to grasp it better (Kennedy 2017: 156). Non-economists might not know what terms such as unconditional growth, efficiency savings or the financialization of public spaces imply. However, poverty, the loss of jobs and free space to hang out for youths as depicted in novels, for example, achieve the purpose of explaining these abstract terms very well. Reading *NW*, we are not presented with definitions and explanations of neoliberalism and its downsides. However, it will be hard not to notice that the social environment depicted in the novel is a brutal one, where upward mobility – if at all – comes at a price and women are not free to choose their preferred way of living – even though they themselves might be unaware of the limited choices they have.

Literature might not only point out the downsides of our current economic system, ideally, it helps us to imagine alternative ways to live and work (Kennedy 2020: 162). Since the general readership of novels such as *NW* has been socialized in capitalist societies, they have difficulties thinking about other possible ways of living than the hegemonic one which is also depicted in the novel. Whereas this happens in other (still limited numbers of) works of literature – which, so far, have to be classified as utopias – *NW* does not point out alternatives to the still dominant economic framework of our societies. Yet, it considers the tenet of “imaginary economics” and reminds us that “[...] the economy does not exist without people at its centre” (Kennedy 2020: 163). Nevertheless, we, as readers, are free to imagine alternative endings to *NW*.

Arts and culture do also have the power to influence people’s perception and understanding of and expectations towards capital (Kennedy 2017: 5). It is important to understand that each and every one of us is affected by economics, the connection between economics and global, as well as national, social and political contexts is well expressed by the term “political economy” (Kennedy 2017: 8). It is thus a mistake to believe that literature and culture may be nice forms of entertainment but irrelevant to the happenings of the world in general and economics in

particular, as “reality consists of the narratives we create to describe it” (Kennedy 2017: 8). Here lies the potential of literary works: by pointing out the shortcomings of our current economic system and relating these to the lives of ordinary individuals, we, the readers, might notice parallels between these personae and our own lives. Ideally, this leads us to overthink and change our actions. Even if literary works do not go as far as to present alternatives – as is the case with *NW* – mirroring current negative social conditions can also be important stepping stones, emphasizing the urgent need for social and economic change.

As emphasized earlier, what has become clear over the last decade is that neoliberalism does not automatically result in growth, global wealth and human progress, but that instead, even Western democracies are faced with “stagnation [...], limited upward mobility, the importance of inheritance, and the proportionally higher growth of earnings from invested wealth than from salary” (Kennedy 2017: 157). Thus, there is an enormous augmentation of poverty, also in the wealthiest nations of the world. However, due to increased social boundaries, it often remains invisible. Fiction might also be the means to render this poverty visible to people inhabiting privileged worlds – be it in the Global North or South – , where the latter is not always recognized easily:

In absolute terms, the poor in developed nations today certainly live ‘better’ lives than the poor of the past [...] Relatively speaking, however, the poor have less access to the opportunities of education and employment, suffer disproportionately higher morbidity, and continue to live in material conditions radically different from the national mainstream. (Kennedy 2017: 179)

This is particularly important because unfortunately, there is a now more than ever untrue belief in the West that poverty only exists in the countries of what used to be considered the Global South (Kennedy 2018: 287). However, global neoliberalism has created one unequal world: “[...] the global world economy is now more accurately characterised as one world shaped by inequality and uneven development, both internal and external” (Kennedy 2017: 5). This means that often, it is not accurate anymore to speak of a Global North and a Global South. Instead, enormous inequalities between the wealthy and the poor exist in former developing nations as well as in the most developed states of the world.

Moreover, depicting the emotions caused by constant struggle and marginalisation might help audiences to better understand the behaviour of the (urban) poor (Kennedy 2017: 193). Crimes such as petty theft or the dealing in and consumption of drugs can even be understood as “symptoms of capitalism’s crisis occurring at the bottom end of the socio-economic scale” and

being more visible than “veiled thefts and dispossessions carried out by the elite financiers and technocrats” (Kennedy 2017: 193f.). Since the economic crisis and the politics of austerity it resulted in, there has been an ongoing decline of the welfare state and a criminalisation of poverty and unemployment (Kennedy 2020: 166). Marginalized characters of *NW*, such as Nathan and Felix, might appear unsympathetic when we read about them in newspaper articles. However, the novel shows us that society has not accorded any other places to them than the ones they were forced to content themselves with. Felix, for example, who in spite of constantly being discriminated against due to his appearance, believes in upward mobility through meritocracy can never leave his social universe of unemployment and petty crimes, upon his attempt to do so, he is killed.

Globally, we are still living in neoliberal societies and it is not clear whether new ways of living will be adopted to counter rising levels of inequality and environmental crises. Unfortunately, the prospects are not very promising, and fiction more often than not does not provide any instruction in how to revolt. As Kennedy mentions, “[w]hereas Marx theorised that worker alienation would result in solidarity and a proletarian revolution, these characters remain in and even accept the economic model that subjugates them” (Kennedy 2017: 200). Instead of solidarity with people in similar situations, the characters typically compete against each other (Kennedy 2017: 200). Even though readers are likely to feel empathy for characters suffering from poverty and exclusion, they are as likely to forget about this empathy as soon as they have closed their books (Kennedy 2017: 290). What is needed, however, is literature awakening “[t]he desire to change the unfair and unequal economic structures at the root of extreme wealth and poverty” (Kennedy 2017: 216). As mentioned, *NW* – in spite of not presenting any alternatives to neoliberalism and the lifestyle it entails – can be said to encourage its critical questioning by “revealing the hidden biases and beliefs of our current neoliberal times” (Kennedy 2020: 165). In addition, it is the responsibility of the humanities to “[think] of economic alternatives [starting] in the imaginary and upturn[ing] the reality we know and experience” (Kennedy 2020: 164).

In the following part, the final introductory part of this thesis, these first thoughts on the economic reality we are inhabiting and the limitations it causes, as well as on the revolutionary potential of literature, will be related to *NW*. It will be shown why Zadie Smith’s novel is a suitable work of fiction to analyse persisting social conditions critically. Moreover, I would like to briefly explain why and how Smith herself is related to the social criticism. Finally, the

thoughts of other researchers, who have already related Smith's oeuvre to social conditions, will be referred to with the objective to draw attention to arguments which might be useful for the present analysis of *NW*.

2.5. Capitalist Hegemony, Culture and *NW*

Capitalism makes possible the participation of everyone in the economic and symbolic sphere of consumption, yet sustains and reproduces itself through the concentration of wealth and the legitimation of social divisions. (Illouz 1997: 2)

According to Mark Fisher, capitalist culture is “formatting and shaping [our] desires, aspirations and hopes” (Fisher: 2009: 9). “[Capitalist Realism] is like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action” (Fisher: 16). Similarly, Jessica Fischer and Gesa Stedman argue that neoliberalism is so persistent because it is imaginable – as opposed to other systems (Fischer; Stedman 2020: 8); which is also the reason why we are in urgent need of literature presenting us with different possible realities, a point that has been made in the preceding section. As a result of this (exclusive) imaginability of neoliberalism, subjects enact the hegemonic idea of neoliberalism, making it real (Fischer; Stedman 2020: 8). Therefore, we, the subjects, are “a vital part of (imagined) economics [...] perform[ing] these imaginaries” (Fischer; Stedman 2020: 8). By living according to neoliberal principles – Fischer and Stedman coin the term “real fiction” – our discourses and practices are shaped according to the former, making us “accept the market as a site of veridiction” to which we “commodify every aspect of our life”, taking the role of the before mentioned homo economicus (Fischer; Stedman 2020: 9). Fischer and Stedman emphasize that we incorporate neoliberal principles and therefore accept our role as economic men and women, being “entrepreneurial”, just as it is expected of us, making “the expectations by society intersect with the desire of the individual” (Fischer; Stedman 2020: 9).

It is particularly for this interconnectedness between capitalism and dominant culture, and one might even say our lives in general, that I want to approach a social phenomenon by means of a literary analysis of *NW*, in order to emphasize that and illustrate how works of literature can be suitable media to illustrate and discuss the effects of capitalism's omnipresence and to point out the difficulties of imagining alternative ways of living due to the hegemony of neoliberal principles, which will be a point of critique in the analysis of *NW*.

Not only in her works of fiction does Zadie Smith become engaged with current political, economic and social developments, as she is a writer who regularly expresses her point of view with regards to these aspects, and has already published essay collections. In her essay “The North West London Blues”, published in June 2012 in *The New York Review of Books*, the author discusses deplorable developments in North West London, the setting of her novel *NW* and the London area of her childhood and youth (Smith 2020: nybooks.com). Contrary to neoliberal fantasies of making profit from the construction of expensive apartment buildings, Smith aims to point out the importance of preserving local places, for example local book shops or libraries: “A library is a different kind of social reality (of the three dimensional kind), which by its very existence teaches a system of values beyond the fiscal” (Smith: nybooks.com). Smith describes her naivety regarding the British state, the retreat of which she would have thought impossible but which has nevertheless manifested itself in its failure – and lack of interest – in preserving the Willesden library and bookshop she has been attending for years: “To steal another writer’s title: England made me. It has never been hard for me to pay my taxes because I understand it to be the repaying of a large, in fact almost incalculable, debt” (Smith: nybooks.com).

In her collection of essays *Feel Free*, Smith comments on current political developments and once again expresses her personal concern with increasing social inequalities: “One useful consequence of Brexit is to finally and openly reveal a deep fracture in British society that has been thirty years in the making” (Smith, *FF*: 27). “Extreme inequality” creates boundaries that eventually endanger the wellbeing of society in general (Smith, *FF*: 29). These augmenting social boundaries are a new development and in close relation with the retreat of the welfare state. Smith recognizes that poverty and exclusion do not only hit the working class in contemporary Britain, but that an increasing percentage of the middle class face economic problems and its consequences as well, something that she could not have imagined earlier in her life: “To truly fall out of the British middle class, when I was a child, you really had to do something pretty spectacular, like becoming a heroin addict or join the Hare Krishnas” (Smith, *FF*: 357).

With regards to the London setting of *NW*, Smith’s statement that “England made [her]” becomes particularly relevant. Smith herself confirms the link between her novel and the first part of her life, explaining *NW* to be a Bildungsroman (O’Keefe 2016: 22). Smith’s novel *Swing Time*, which was published in 2016, is largely set in North-West London as well, like *NW*, it is

a coming-of-age novel about two female friends whose questioning of identity resembles that of the two protagonists in *NW*. In addition, the bond which is created by growing up in the same socio-geographical area is stressed throughout the novel. Smith's novella *The Embassy of Cambodia* is related to *NW* too, as it is set in North-West London and follows a female protagonist who has recently arrived in London in order to work as a maid. The novella is of particular interest to me as it deals with problematic forms of employment and reflects the important role which female migrant workers play in England's (as well as the whole Global North's) social reproduction, a topic that is featured in *NW* too. Smith's own connection to this part of London is expressed in the style of the novel, as the focalization and narration is performed by the inhabitants of Willesden ("We, the people of Willesden"; "We tend to assume the worst, here in Willesden") (Smith; *TEoC*: 67; 117). As the analysis of *NW* aims to illustrate, Zadie Smith's own background, as well as her literary activism, are reflected in the novel. Although the literature analysis does not focus on an autobiographical reading of *NW*, it is nevertheless interesting to know the author's background and her personal beliefs – which we, thanks to her many essays, have – in order to better understand the context of her oeuvre.

NW has been of interest to researchers and resulted in analyses with regards to its discussion of neoliberalism and socio-economic inequality, its striking stylistic features and possible interpretations of them, the decisiveness of geography (hence the title), identity, postcolonialism (and in particular, postcolonial London) and feminism (as the two protagonists are female and largely struggling due to their biological sex and social gender). Some of the results of research focusing on *NW* can be related to the present approach to the novel.

In his article "Post-Hysteries: Zadie Smith and the Fiction of Austerity", David Marcus identifies *NW* as a response to the many social and economic struggles Europe and the Western world in general have had to face since the turn of the century. Published in 2012, and thus written in the direct aftermath of the great financial crisis of 2008, Marcus coins the term "fiction of austerity" for *NW* because it deals with the effects the economic crisis has had on the life of average citizens, be it in an indirect way. "[...] austerity – freedom from state debt – is, in fact, just another way of passing these burdens from those better off to those who are increasingly worse off" (Marcus 2013: 73). This is illustrated in the stark contrast between the wealthiest in *NW*, especially Natalie and Frank, who are not affected by the crisis, and the poorest, for example Shar, who might be homeless and has to beg.

In *NW*, incorporating a style which was described as hysterical realism by James Wood because of its application of realism mixed with a depiction of chaos, Smith shows her recognition of the importance of political economy in fiction (Marcus 2013: 69). According to Marcus, *NW* might be read as a “catalogue of economic austerity”, presenting material as well as psychological shocks of those left behind in North West London (Marcus 2013: 69f.). Capitalism – in its modern form, i.e. neoliberalism – has led to a retreat of the welfare state, which now is a “post-welfare state”, and inequalities due to class, origin or gender are as persisting as ever (Marcus 2013: 70). And this, as Marcus brilliantly highlights, is one of the main arguments of Smith’s novel: in spite of believing in meritocracy, in our own power to decide how we want to live, there is hardly any escape of our circumstances, be they geographical, social, financial or ethnic:

The freedoms afforded to us – the liberties of the market – are in fact working against us, making us less, not more, free. The inhabitants of NW, that is, to be more precise, the council estates of North West London, who make up the core personae of Smith’s novel of the same title, might believe in their ability to be autonomous and self-making, however, even if they manage to climb the social ladder, their social uprising comes at a price. (Marcus 2013: 70)

In his paper “Neoliberalism and False Consciousness Before and After Brexit in Zadie Smith’s *NW*”, James Arnett references to Marcus’s “fiction of austerity”, as he, in a similar way Marcus does, considers *NW* to principally be a work about life in a European post welfare state, considering oneself to be free but actually living within the ever more tightening constraints neoliberalism is imposing on us:

Charting the distinction between knowing and feeling is what permits her to frame the dilemma of contemporary subjectivity as the tension between the ability to intellectually perceive one’s subjugation to capitalism and the affective experience of nevertheless feeling like a free subject under the aegis of neoliberalism’s identity-empowering ideologies. (Arnett 2018: 1)

With regards to literary classifications, Arnett would classify Smith’s novel as “austere realism” and he considers the work to be a direct response to the economic and financial crisis of 2008 on the one hand, and at the same time as foreshadowing the rise of populism and nationalism on the other hand, which resulted in the election of Donald Trump as US president and the pro-Brexit vote, amongst other things (Arnett 2018: 1). *NW* presents a neoliberal state unable and unwilling to help those in need and therefore results in the feeling of “populist anger” among the marginalized (Arnett 2018: 2).

Arnett makes an interesting point by referring to Marx, as our Western neoliberal economic order leads us to believe that we are responsible for our individual fate, a result of a state of false consciousness, which Natalie, one of the two female protagonists, has fully incorporated (Arnett 2018: 4). This becomes apparent in the final passage of the novel, when Natalie, whose language is described as “meritocratic bootstraps rhetoric” by Arnett, explains Leah’s and her own success: “People get what they deserve.” (Arnett 2018: 4). This is related to the reference to the incorporation of neoliberal principles by economic men and women, made at the beginning of this section, which is mirrored in *NW*’s characters.

In “Revisionary Modernism and Postmillennial Experimentation in Zadie Smith’s *NW*”, Wendy Knepper also refers to the problems caused to individuals by the increasing importance of the wellbeing of the economy and neglect of the individuals inhabiting it, she describes the book as “showing how socioeconomic pressures shape life histories and aspirations of people [...]” (Knepper 2013: 112). She further sees *NW* to be a concrete call for social justice:

Through the imagined cartography of *NW*, Zadie Smith examines shifting relations to the production of locality in a globalized world. Her fiction attends to the dynamics of identity politics, global finance and virtual life through the network of society [...] (Knepper 2013: 123ff.)

Similar to the authors of the papers discussed above, Caroline Luisine sees *NW* as centrally a work on the “condition of England” (Luisine 2018: 247). She relates the novel to the longstanding British literary tradition of discussing deplorable states of affairs, one might, for instance, think of Dickens’s oeuvre. The modern “condition of England novel” is described as follows (Luisine 2018: 248f.): “[...] above all concerned with the effects of the politics of austerity introduced by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010, along with the ongoing issue of immigration [and to further] explore key aspects of social reality [...]”.

Molly Slavin’s paper “Nowhere and Northwest, Brent and Britain: Geographies of Elsewhere in Zadie Smith’s *NW*” examines the importance of place in Smith’s novel. As Slavin mentions, the geographic centre of *NW* is Kilburn in North West London, where the two female protagonists and other characters of the novel have grown up, in the Caldwell Tower blocks, to be precise and – central for the plot of the novel – which they have not managed to leave, be it psychologically, physically or both (Slavin: 99). It is interesting to explore geography in *NW* because in spite of being set in London, the focus of attention is the geographic edge, which of

course is representative not only of a place, but also the people partly living on the margin of society (Slavin: 100). The multiperspectivity featured in *NW* is reflected in descriptions of the city, because the latter depend on the person perceiving their environment (Slavin: 100).

With relation to place, another observation is that Zadie Smith's fictional and non-fictional work is concerned with the ways in which neoliberal organisation of places monopolizes urban spaces. As a born and bred Londoner, she is mostly concerned with London, especially North-West London. The reduction of public spaces such as libraries is a direct result of the "privatization of our lives" reducing the opportunities for spending time in the city without having to consume and to pay for services, which results in the fragmentation of space (Mies; Federici: 6f.). This fragmentation of space does not remain without social consequences, but results in the disruption of boundaries and the involuntary individualism which is the norm in our modern world.

An important point concerning geography and neoliberalism is mentioned by Melissa Kennedy when she defines the "global city" as being the place where neoliberalism finds its fullest expression (Kennedy 2017: 159): "The financialization of urban space and the body that inhabits it allows for comparison across world urban centres [...]". In other words, people working under slave like conditions are very likely to be found in London as well as in some of the world's poorest metropolises. London is an example par excellence for "uneven internal development" (Kennedy 2017: 160). Already in its time as the centre of a World Empire, it was criticized by John Maynard Keynes for not affording "the highest standards of achievement to which its own citizens are capable, because they do not 'pay'" (Kennedy 2017: 160). It is not yet clear which role London will have after the execution of Brexit, but to this day, the city is one of the most important financial centres of the world, partly due to inequality, as cheap labour is supplied by migrants of poorer nations, while the global elite is working at the other end of the socio-economic scale, for example as high executive salaries and CEOs of transnationals (Kennedy 2017: 160).

Moreover, London is the most unequal region of the United Kingdom, and the city's socio-economic geography has not changed much since the Industrial Revolution (Kennedy 2017: 161). In our times, it is particularly immigrants who are affected by poverty and inequality (Kennedy 2017: 161). Postcolonial British fiction has a long tradition of narrating the struggles of migrants in London, reflecting and critiquing the inequalities of this global city:

Regardless of the time of writing or the community portrayed, recurrent experiences, including child poverty, school drop-outs, gangs, addictions and overcrowded and precarious living arrangements, as well as unemployment, underemployment, and exploited and underpaid illegal workers are common in over 150 years of London fiction. (Kennedy 2017: 161f.)

Even nowadays, ghettoization is common in the capital, and socio-economic strata are normally rigidly separated geographically, thus: “geography and salary are still closely connected” (Kennedy 2017: 162f.). According to Kennedy, “[t]he contemporary fiction that most consistently maps the dynamics of neoliberal London is by black British and immigrant writers” (Kennedy 2017: 165). The protagonists of these narrations are “losers of capitalism” who – thanks to the works of literature – are brought to the centre despite inhabiting the margins of London due to “urban inequality” (Kennedy 2017: 166). As a London novel that presents the lives of immigrants and Black British characters, *NW* is directly engaged in these issues.

It has already been remarked upon the fact that *NW* can be regarded as a postcolonial novel, as its geographical centre, as well as its central characters, are multi-ethnic, London is presented as a multicultural metropole, and the problems and obstacles the protagonists have to face are partly due to their ethnicities. Slavin, for example, sees the geographical descriptions and perceptions of the novel as “postcolonial geographies of the city”, the main narrators being Leah, who is of Irish descent, and Natalie, whose parents are from Jamaica (Slavin: 101). This, is also observed by Christopher Holmes in his paper “The Novel’s Third Way: Zadie Smith’s ‘Hysterical Realism’”, in which he describes the contemporary London depicted by Smith as a “chessboard of postcolonial dreams and frustrations” (Luisine: 147).

However, I would argue that *NW* is not a classic postcolonial novel, as it foregrounds struggles which are rather related to gender, social background, and issues of identity. Naturally, these struggles can never be considered isolated from the ethnicity of the characters, most of whom are confronted with several attributes that disfavour them with regards to other Britons and thus with the sociological phenomenon of intersectionality. Nevertheless, the fact that Leah, who is of Irish descent and from her outward appearance would most likely be considered a typical English woman, faces similar problems as Natalie, whose Caribbean origin is recognized at first glance, indicates that a variety of factors lead *NW*’s characters to be in – more often than not – challenging positions.

Philip Tew, editor of a reader on Zadie Smith and her oeuvre, also argues that he as well as the scholars contributing to his edition do not see Smith primarily as a postcolonial writer but that her works are “asking about the human condition at large” (Tew 2013: 2f.). I would thus argue that Smith’s novels, particularly *NW*, show that in contemporary postcolonial neoliberal societies, “[o]lder possibilities of class- or race-based solidarities seem long gone in this liquid postmodernity wrought from neo-liberal aspirations” (McLeod 2020: 616). *NW* is to a much larger extent about boundaries created by social – and not ethnic – origin. Therefore, another interpretation of Slavin might be of even greater importance for a reading of *NW*, namely her explanation that *NW* could also stand for nowhere. This makes sense, as North West London and its marginalized inhabitants and their concerns may often be neglected, and a tourist’s interest would probably not be to explore this area of London (Slavin: 101f.). Smith, of course, shows that *NW* is a place, and that is made into one by all the people inhabiting it (Slavin: 101f.).

The aim of this section was to present a brief review of academic research on Zadie Smith’s works, particularly *NW*, which emphasizes its depiction of social problems due to current economic crises. This is mainly meant to indicate why an analysis of *NW* from a heterodox economics perspective might bring fruitful insights, particularly when the main focus is on women and society’s expectations towards them, an angle of analysis which so far has hardly been applied to the novel. Moreover, I tried to relate Zadie Smith’s own social activism – mostly manifested in her writings – to the points of interest in this thesis in order to show that the world depicted in her novel reflects our own “real fiction” which is ruled by neoliberal principles which we have internalized to a large extent. In the next section, which is the main part of this thesis, *NW* is analysed from a feminist economics framework.

3. Social Reproduction in Zadie Smith's *NW*

3.1. Aspects of Interest

Relating to the before established meaning of social reproduction – i.e. that social reproduction refers to all activities which ensure the existence and functioning of society and can also be seen as the reproduction of social expectations and discourses by individuals –, the following aspects contained in this sociological concept will be of importance in the succeeding analysis of *NW*: First, having children, which is a prerequisite for the reproduction of workers, and the core responsibility of women, according to hegemonic economic assumptions. Therefore, female fertility will be of central interest here. With regards to female fertility, the importance of time with regards to social reproduction will be discussed. Since time is a central category in Smith's novel, an aim of this examination is to illustrate how time is related to female reproduction and societal expectations in *NW*. Second, sexuality and sexual relationships, which are a central part of physical and psychological reproduction are investigated. Secret and repressed homosexual desires are of interest here, they are contrasted with the hegemonic idea of romantic heterosexual love. Violence, be it in the form of sexual exploitation or sexual harassment, is analysed too, as it is a characteristic of human relationships, in particular when they are relations of hierarchy. Third, a comparison between paid and unpaid labour is presented. Furthermore, emotional labour, for example taking care of family members, is included in this point. As it is primarily women who are considered as emotional caretakers due to certain characteristics assigned to them, socially and culturally established female characteristics are of interest here. This point will also refer to the fact that women tend to be employed in sectors which can be seen as an extension of the housewife position.

In this literary analysis, in order to examine societal expectations towards individuals and women in particular and the problems this pressure might cause, an extension of the meaning of the term social reproduction is conducted. Another, additional reading of social reproduction thus can define the concept as the act of reproducing naturalized social discourses of what individuals ought to do in order to live accordingly to the standards of society. This, as will be discussed in detail, can, for example be the incorporation of neoliberal credos (such as “I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me”) in the behaviour of the characters. In relation to the pressure resulting from social expectations, individual struggles and crises and their relation to a capitalist way of living in a neoliberal environment are described in this section. In addition, I will look at the marginalized characters of *NW* who have not taken a place in the system of social reproduction, which could be interpreted as a failure for which they are

responsible, but also as their recognition of their own inability to act contrary to social expectations. Throughout the discussion of social reproduction and the literary analysis of *NW*, I will try to find the potential of the novel in narrating social conditions and to criticize its lack of imagination when it comes to presenting alternatives to the system and/or the life it subjugates us to.

3.2. Female Fertility, Sexuality and the Importance of Time

3.2.1. Time, Capitalism and (Social) Reproduction

The aim of this section is to introduce central theoretical thoughts on female fertility and to present how the latter is linked to time, relating these thoughts to a close reading of relevant passages of *NW*. An attempt is made to explain why the still existing capitalist assumption of female reproduction as belonging to nature is problematic. As will be discussed in more detail later, this is one of the core issues of a feminist approach to economics, i.e. the inclusion of (social) reproduction in economics in order to combine pure market economics with social reproduction, as without the latter, human life would not exist. Fertility and having children are closely tied to societal expectations, as women of reproductive age, particularly if they are in apparently stable heterosexual relationships as Leah and Natalie, are expected to establish a family. Therefore, it is already in this section that societal expectations – this time in relation to female fertility – will be at the centre of analysis.

In our neoliberal era, one good that is always scarce is time. According to Knoblauch, this is no surprise due to the “Zeitrationalität” – rationality of time – of capitalist economics, which have the goal to produce as much as possible in as little time as possible (Knoblauch 2019: 132). However, the concept of economics including social reproduction has to recognize the complexity of time, which, more often than not, cannot be optimized (Knoblauch 2019: 132f.). This is of particular importance with regards to female fertility, as the reproductive lifespan of women is much more limited than that of men. This, as very well depicted throughout *NW*, might put them under enormous pressure with regards to using their fertile years for procreation.

The female duty of having children is an essential theme in *NW*. Already on the first page of the novel we learn that Leah is pregnant: “Blue cross on a white stick, clear, definitive.” (3). The positive pregnancy test opens Leah’s constant fight against pregnancy and her – be it silent – questioning of the importance and meaning of having a family. By her social environment,

Leah, who obviously does not want to have children, is constantly confronted with the threatening ending of her reproductive age, for example by her mother: “[...] Now, any news? On that front? – On what front? – On the grandma front. On the ticking-clock front. – Still ticking. [...]” (18). She faces pressure from society in general, represented by her colleagues (“You’re next!”, 34), Frank (“-Isn’t it your turn soon?”, 66) and her family and husband in particular. Leah is unable to discuss her desire to stay how she is with him and undergoes a secret abortion in order to terminate her pregnancy, it is already her third one: “That first time, she was two months gone. The second time, two months and three weeks. This is her third” (60). In addition, Leah starts to take the contraceptive pill without telling her husband, which leads to Michel’s dismay upon finding out, as he simply cannot understand why his wife does not share his desire to found a family, as he is of the opinion that her love for him is reason enough for her to perform the labour of love, bearing his children. This comment reveals that for Michel, sexual love is not only about a romantic relationship but also implicitly contains the potential of that love to result in children. It is the opposite for Leah, who is dismayed at each pregnancy and feels that her biology is impinging on her understanding of her romantic partnership, which satisfies her but is in contrast to the general belief that a so-called happy and healthy relationship between a heterosexual fertile couple will automatically result in offspring.

Leah and Natalie are both conscious of the fact that time passes differently for women. Both seem to be aware of the high speed with which time moves as soon as adulthood is reached, as Natalie remarks: “If only she could slow the whole thing down! She had been eight for a hundred years. She was thirty-four for seven minutes.” (279). However, whereas Natalie seems to have accepted her aging and the progress of time (“The key to it all was the management of time. Fortunately, time management was Natalie’s gift.”, 278), Leah refuses to grow up, which is also reflected in her rejection of building a family, as will be discussed in more detail at a later point in this section.

NW illustrates how tightly stable heterosexual relationships of people at reproductive age are tied to social expectations of having children, Leah and Natalie are constantly asked about their procreative projects, for example by Natalie’s cousin: “‘Leah. She’s good. Married, working for the council.’ ‘Is it. That’s nice. Kids?’ ‘No. Not yet.’ ‘You lot are leaving it late, innit.’” (248). This statement emphasizes that for Natalie’s cousin, who might be seen as representing the general opinion, it is beyond imagination that Leah does not want to have children at all. For her, marriage and a job will automatically result in having children, either sooner or later

(for the more educated, like Natalie and Leah, as we can see from her remark). The novel features various secondary characters (Natalie's cousin, Leah's mother, Michel, Frank) whose function it is to reiterate social norms, comment critically on Leah's and Natalie's life choices and to remind them of their procreative duties. By juxtaposing these representatives of the dominant social opinion of a successful life – getting educated, getting a job, getting married, having children – which might be referred to as temporal heteronormativity advertised by capitalism, to Natalie's and especially Leah's personal choices and (secret) opinions – both women do not contradict the system openly – , the novel achieves to highlight the difficulties of modern women to decide against these social expectations which are still fulfilled by a majority of us. Moreover, we as readers might finally recognize the artificiality of common discourses such as that of temporal heteronormativity, which otherwise often remain unquestioned.

As we see, time in *NW* is primarily related to the female characters and their reproductive duties. The novel emphasizes this one-sided pressure to reproduce, for example through Natalie's remark upon visiting her homosexual brother who inhabits an apartment with other men:

If it was not quite possible to feel happy for him it was because the arrangement was timeless – it did not come bound by the constrictions of time – and this in turn was the consequence of a crucial detail: no women were included within the schema. Women come bearing time. [...] In reality, she had ten texts from Frank and it was time to go home. The time had come. (268)

This passage refers to a visit Natalie pays to her brother and his male flat mates. The visit enables her to escape her pressured daily life and familial duties, in contrast to other women she occasionally meets in her leisure time, in the social environment of her brother, she is not reminded of her role as a wife, mother and barrister. However, Frank's messages remind Natalie that she, as opposed to her brother and his friends, cannot stay in this timeless condition. The passage can be interpreted as a metaphor for one of the core elements of *NW* as well as the theoretical concept of feminist economics and social reproduction, i.e. the problem of women to be torn between the pressure to succeed in their private life – this still means finding a partner, having children, feeling fulfilled – and their professional life – women staying at home are rare in the Western world. In addition, it shows that Natalie, being a wife and mother of two children, cannot use her leisure time to simply relax, like her brother and his friends, but has to fulfil familial duties. Considering time differences between men and women in general, the passage also hints to the fact that men do not have to worry about procreation, their procreative life span

being much longer than that of women, and, in general, even if they already have a family, are not the main care takers of their children, women, upon reaching adulthood, are confronted with their procreative duties and the consequences of the latter (fertility, contraception, finding a partner – to a larger degree than men). Natalie's brother, being homosexual, is free of social pressure, as in his heteronormative environment, nobody expects him to have children, which enables him to continue his carefree lifestyle. Moreover, women still are the main care takers of their children. Thus, they cannot allow themselves to forget time, as hyperbolically illustrated in the discussed passage of *NW*. This, of course, is a direct result of neoliberal relations of power. Procreative and reproductive duties are assigned to women while men are free to follow their personal and professional interest relatively independently.

Time is of utter importance to Leah too. Having studied philosophy, Leah takes the role of an existentialist doubting that life has a concrete meaning, which depresses her, in particular because life – and once again especially female life – is bound to the passing of time, and aging:

I am eighteen in my mind I am eighteen and if I do nothing if I stand still nothing will change I will be eighteen always. For always. Time will stop. I'll never die. Very banal, this fear. Everybody has it these days. (24)

The significance of time is repeatedly commented on by Leah. In the quotation above, she is apparently worrying about the passing of time, which she tries to stop, for example by not having children. Naturally, Leah is aware of her incapability to stop time and is referring to the current fear of the end of one's lifetime. Therefore, it seems that Leah is aware of society's fear of aging, as well as her own troubled psyche which could be a result of the constant pressure she experiences being reminded of her reproductive duties.

Moreover, Leah reflects about the meaning of time philosophically, concluding that she only remembers one thing from studying philosophy: "In the end, only one idea reliably retained: time as a relative experience, different for the jogger, the lover, the tortured, the leisured." (33). To her statement, and I can imagine that Smith intended to remind us of this issue by having Leah reflect on time, it could be added that time is a relative experience for women, who, due to their reproductive life span are constantly under pressure and reminded of their biological duties, which is apparent in another passage of *NW*, a dialogue between Michel and Leah:

– and need to see a proper doctor. A clinic. We keep trying. And Nothing. You're thirty-five this year. [...] Once they were the same age. Now Leah is aging in dog

years. Her thirty-five is seven times his, and seven times more important, so important he has to keep reminding her of the numbers, in case she forgets. (20)

This passage points out as how closely related to nature society – particularly men – perceive women, since Leah's aging and the counting of her age is related to that of an animal, a dog. Thus, even Leah's husband – if indirectly – depersonalizes Leah when it comes to her procreative duties. Throughout the novel, he neglects the preferences and wishes of his wife, since for him, it is unquestionable that Leah shares his longing for offspring. The fortunate position of men when it comes to procreation is also indicated in this passage, as Michel, in contrast to Leah, does not have to worry about the passing of the years – in spite of being the same age as his wife. This is particularly apparent in Michel declaring that the couple needs medical support due to Leah's age. He does not even once think about the possibility of the problem being him. This, once more, reflects the common perception that procreation is a female responsibility. In addition, it is very probable that Michel considers himself young and fertile, but not his wife, in spite of them being the same age. This is also a result of society's depiction of fertile women – for example in ads. On average, hardly a woman over thirty can be seen, and it has only been very recently that some efforts against age-discrimination have been made, which are, for example, reflected in elderly female models in advertisements. Men in ads, on the other hand, are often of a more mature age.

As we have seen in the passage of *NW* above, Leah's depression might be related to the fact that she does not want to fulfil societal expectations, in particular with regards to procreation. This is the reason why she is secretly taking the contraceptive pill, and has had a secret abortion. As Leah does not expect – and would most likely not encounter – empathy and understanding of the people closest to her, especially her husband Michel, she has to lie constantly and pretend to share Michel's wish to found a family, or at least not openly contradict his dreams. It is not clear why exactly Leah does not want to have children; however, it can be suspected that this is due to her anxiety of the passing of time and of aging. In addition, she would be satisfied in her childless relationship with Michel: "For some reason it has never occurred to her that all this wondrous screwing was heading towards a certain, perfectly obvious destination." (24). As will be commented on in more detail in the section on the idea of heteronormative love at a later point, Leah has neglected the fact that it is taken for granted that married couples procreate willingly.

The threatening end of female fertility is also felt by the male characters of *NW*. Michel's anxiety of not having children with Leah due to her limited procreative lifespan has already been analysed. In a more indirect way, the male fear of female infertility, closely related to the incapability to imagine the aging of attractive females is illustrated by Felix who is in love with Grace, currently in her 20s: "But how could Grace ever be seventy?" (119). This statement once again illustrates society's, and particularly male, difficulties with the acceptance of female aging. 70-year-old Grace is not as desirable to Felix as 20-year-old Grace is. This relates to the above analysis of the differences between female and male aging. As women are still highly objectified and often perceived in relation to their fertility in our neoliberal system, it is no surprise that Felix does not seem to desire an older version of Grace.

Considering a theoretical feminist perspective on procreation, Federici does not disfavour having children. On the contrary, she states that it is essential that people have enough money in order to found families (Federici 2012: 58). However, she denies the claim that institutions such as kindergartens liberate women and allow them to pursue leisure activities, she rather considers them to "ensure that women can do more additional work" (Federici 2012: 32). What women would need is more spare time to be creative, not in order to do more paid or unpaid work (Federici 2012: 57). It is a fact that due to unpaid labour such as child care, the weekly amount of working hours conducted by women exceeds that of men. However, due to the naturalisation of women doing housework, these chores are often not perceived as real work. For this reason, women have difficulties performing as well professionally as their male counterparts, who normally have more time to invest into their careers. In addition, after a long day of work, men are commonly not expected to contribute to housework. Women, who are often employed part-time, on the other hand, appear to have enough time to do everything at home. Therefore, there is often no time for them to engage in any of their hobbies. In *NW*, in spite of the fact that Natalie works full-time as a barrister, she has the main responsibility of the realm of housework and childcare because of Frank's even more busy schedule. Only through employing an aid can she buy a bit of extra time. Women who do not have these financial means, of course, hardly have a way out of the still common distribution of tasks in a couple. To conclude, fertility and female procreation are central elements of social reproduction, and they are overwhelmingly present themes in *NW*. The novel highlights that society considers primarily women to be responsible for procreation and puts pressure onto them due to their limited procreative lifespan. What is realistically and sometimes hyperbolically portrayed in *NW* is a traditional, heterodox view on family life and procreation. However, in spite of

indirectly criticizing this system by depicting how it constrains women, Smith leaves open how alternatives to these normative ideas of fertility and procreation might look like. Moreover, she does not present her female characters as balanced. Natalie works long hours in her official job, Leah, after her nine-to-five job, sits in the community garden. Throughout *NW*, hobbies or preferred leisure activities of either Leah or Natalie are never mentioned. Leah might not be able to engage in them for financial reasons, in addition, due to her depressed state, she might not want to do anything; Natalie clearly does not have enough leisure time. Thus, *NW* presents us with two protagonists who do not take enough care of themselves, which is a female problem due to the high amount of unpaid work performed by them. As has been touched upon in this section, fertility and procreation are related to social taboos regarding sexuality. In the following section, a closer look at this side of reproduction is taken.

3.2.2. Modern Society & the Creation of Taboos

As emphasized in the preceding section, female fertility, although given the illusion of choice for women, is highly controlled through social expectations of normativity and particularly with regards to its limited duration. Another central element of fertility and procreation which is of interest in the present section is female sexuality. Like fertility in general, female sexuality is highly controlled and restricted in several ways, as will be explained and illustrated in what follows.

With the advent of modern society, attempts were made to alienate women from their bodies, the consequences of which are still present today (Mies; Federici 2014: 83). Thus, it is not correct to associate the killing of so-called witches – for example women who possessed knowledge of their bodies and were able to prevent conception or terminate pregnancies – of the Middle Ages with dark times (Mies; Federici 2014: 83). It is rather to the contrary, the more society developed, the more it was in need to control women (Mies; Federici 2014: 83). The result is that even nowadays, in the 21st century, many women are not sufficiently informed about (female) sexual reproduction, and society in general is very restrained when it comes to openly talking about rape, abortion or contraception; even everyday topics, such as menstruation, are largely ignored, only recently, there have been campaigns for freeing menstruation from cultural and social taboos (and taxes with regards to sanitary products) in many European countries.

The feminist movement of the 1970s was important in terms of raising awareness regarding taboos surrounding female sexuality (Mies; Federici 2014: 25). Abortion, female sexuality and homosexuality were publicly discussed for the first time, feminists wanted to escape and combat male domination (Mies; Federici 2014: 25). In spite of legislation in many European countries, including the United Kingdom, allowing women to decide whether they want to terminate a pregnancy, it can by no means be said that issues of female reproduction are not surrounded by taboos. This becomes apparent in *NW*, as Leah fears to discuss her contraceptive intentions with her husband and has repeatedly carried out abortions without informing him.

Not only does the novel demonstrate that women carry the main responsibility for contraception, it also depicts the taboos surrounding female procreation and sexuality, which is, on the one hand, reflected in Leah's secret contraceptive activities, and, on the other hand, in a description of abortion, which is related to moral judgements and costs:

She had hoped to find another method. Some old wives' remedy that might be secretly applied at home using everyday products from the bathroom cabinet. Anything else will be expensive [...] Online she finds only moralists and no practical advice at all besides the old horror stories from the pre-moral past [...] She is here instead, with an old credit card from college days. Strange place. No place. Could be a dentist, a chiropractor. Private medicine [...] Money avoids relationship, obligation. (59)

Various difficulties concerning contraception are illustrated in this passage: First, the fact that Leah was not able to prevent getting pregnant. Had she had the possibility to tell her husband about her preference not to have children, she very likely could have used contraception openly. Second, the fact that women who want to undergo an abortion are confronted with moralists who want to influence their decisions about their own bodies. Third, the fact that Leah has to pay for the abortion. It is not the objective of this thesis to discuss the moral and ethnic aspects of abortion. However, the reality that Leah has to pay her abortion privately indicates that women in financially less fortunate situations are pushed into using illegal and potentially dangerous methods to terminate a pregnancy, especially in countries which have stricter abortion laws than England. This passage also illustrates that due to the retreat of the welfare state, medical help and treatments are often only possible for those who can pay for them privately. Characteristic for neoliberalism, those who are able to afford private medication do not need to explain their reasons or motivations for undergoing an abortion, as is apparent in Leah's reflection on the process. Therefore, we see that *NW* points out mechanisms of inequality which are underlying contraception and abortion, the former still being the

responsibility for women and often considered a taboo which is not mentioned openly, the latter only being easily accessible for women who can afford private medicine.

With regards to sexual orientation, it can be said that capitalism is heteronormative, and that heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual behaviour (Federici 2012: 24f.). Additionally, women are only permitted to be sexually active in their reproductive age, which is apparent in the condition that an overwhelming majority of women – and in particular sexualized female bodies – shown publicly, for example in ads, are in this age (Federici 2012: 25). The commercialization of procreative female bodies has resulted in a majority of women feeling uncomfortable about themselves, as they measure themselves against the “standards of performance for female bodies [...] that everyone [...] is aware of, as they are splashed all around us, on every wall in our cities and TV screen” (Federici 2012: 26). Thus, women look at themselves and at other women through male eyes, they have internalized the male gaze, which is the gaze of capitalism, which considers female bodies as a product that can be sold:

On how our body looks depends whether we can get a good or bad job (in marriage or out of the home), whether we can some social power, some company to defeat the loneliness that awaits us in our old age and often in our youth as well. And we always fear our body might turn against us, we may get fat, get wrinkles, age fast, make people indifferent to us, lose our right to intimacy, lose our chance of being touched or hugged. (Federici 2012: 26)

Sexual liberation, according to Federici, has led to an augmentation of female work: “Now we are expected to have a waged job, still clean the house and have children and, at the end of a double work day, be ready to hop in bed and be sexually enticing” (Federici 2012: 25). Another aspect related to sexual liberation is the female responsibility for contraception (Federici 2012: 26f.), which, in *NW*, is reflected in Leah’s attempts of contraception and her abortions. *NW* presents female sexuality as ambiguous, on the one hand, it is related to release and romance, on the other hand, however, to burdens and pressure. To begin with Leah, she is highly satisfied with the erotic life she and Michel share. However, she is hurt by the fact that their sexuality has the eventual goal of founding a family, which Michel fully accepts.

Natalie, on the other hand, does not find erotic fulfilment in her marriage – as opposed to Leah’s sexual life, *NW* never mentions Natalie’s marital sex life, it might not be existent – and thus seeks encounters with strangers on the internet, being very popular on the platform she is using, which once again reflects first, our society’s idealization of fertile – and therefore young – females and the sexualization women of colour are faced with frequently: “Everyone’s seeking

a BF 18-35” (288). These encounters, however, do mainly lead to Natalie’s frustration: “Natalie asked them: boys, boys, why are we doing this? You’ve got the real thing here. But they kept on with the internet. [...] Or maybe they couldn’t do anything without the net somewhere in the mix.” (296). This quotation illustrates the commercialization of female bodies as well as women’s responsibility to make sex enjoyable for their partners. Even in her extramarital encounters, Natalie is confronted with unspoken social rules of how women should look and act, consequently, she has no possibility to escape the social structures she is caught in in her everyday life. It is not clear why Smith does not offer Natalie another – more emancipated, independent and modern – way of escaping her everyday life. It might be due to her tendency to present us with slightly exaggerated social situations in order to draw our attention to inequalities and problems. In addition, she might intend to point out Natalie’s private frustration and lets her look for closeness and validation on the internet, a place which is frequently used by those seeking for social relations but not finding them in today’s individualized and superficial world.

The heteronormative idea of love does not leave room for alternative forms of relationships or sexual orientations for the protagonists in *NW*, a fact which is illustrated by the changes in the love lives of Leah and Natalie. Presently, they are in conventional relationships but face struggles for different reasons. In their past, however, they had homosexual relationships:

Natalie Blake had seen Leah do this many times, but with boys, and there had always seemed something a little shocking and perverse in it, whereas here the relation looked natural. This thought made Natalie wonder at herself and whether she was with God these days, or if she was with him at all. (210)

She is something beautiful in the sunshine, something between a boy and a girl, reminding Leah of a time in her life when she had not yet been called upon to make a final decision about all that. [...] Lying in bed next to a girl she loved, years ago, discussing the number 37. [...] She once was a true love of mine. Now that girl is married, too. (42f.)

Regarding the first quotation, it refers to Natalie observing her friend Leah in a romantic entanglement with a female lover at a college party. It is interesting that for Natalie, Leah’s behaviour, which previously was reserved for her encounters with male lovers, seems natural when applied to a woman. Smith might illustrate the artificiality of our perception that the normal form of sexuality is heterosexuality. Natalie’s observation might also indicate that Natalie herself is attracted to women, a claim which is supported by the second quotation, as this passage might refer to a former romantic relationship between Leah and Keisha. Both

women have, however, given up or rather repressed their erotic desire towards women in order to share their lives with men. Concerning this aspect of dominant societal expectations, they have fulfilled them by suppressing desires which would encounter rejection. This is also due to the fact that society expects women of reproductive age to be sexually active in order to have children. Whereas their erotic experiments as youths might be laughed about, as adult women, society would not forgive them for not performing according to dominant standards with regards to gender roles.

In addition, it can be observed that Leah and Natalie have adopted and internalized the male gaze, as a consequence, they are looking at themselves and at others through male eyes, a result of the neoliberal commercialization of female bodies, not only leading to competition, but also to dissatisfaction with their own appearance as well as the desire for self-enhancement:

On these occasions – despite her new status as a big lawyer lady – she experienced the same feelings of insecurity and inadequacy Tonya had compelled in her when they were children. This afternoon Tonya wore sweatpants with HONEY written across the posterior and a close-fitting denim waistcoat with a yellow bra underneath. (246f.)

What is striking about *NW* is that this theoretical background is given in the novel too: “It is perhaps that profound way in which capitalism enters women’s minds and bodies that renders ‘ruthless comparison’ the basic mode of their relationships with others.” (214). In spite of her superiority with regards to education, profession and class, Natalie feels insecure because she compares herself with other women through an internalized male gaze, and thus focuses exclusively on her outward appearance and her sex appeal. As pointed out by Federici and mentioned earlier in this section, this sexualized perception of women – by other women as well as men – renders private and professional fulfilment more difficult for women than for men. Whereas educated, rich men of all ages hardly have problems finding a partner – albeit not a true love – and thanks to experience, talent and self-confidence, might succeed in their jobs, women who are not perceived as attractive face difficulties in the realm of the private and the public. On the other hand, as mirrored in Natalie’s case, who is faced with sexual harassment at her workplace, and witnessed by the general public in the many reported cases of the *Me Too movement*, youth and physical attractiveness render professional encounters problematic for women too. This form of inequality is discussed in more detail in the section on violence, competition and exploitation. By presenting Natalie, a successful, educated woman, as insecure with regards to her looks, *NW* indicates that even in our apparently advanced, egalitarian

society, women are often reduced to nature, a fact to which even this otherwise often self-confident, strong character bends to.

It is in line with its heteronormativity that capitalism advertises the concept of romantic love. As highlighted in *NW*, even in our current times of neoliberalism, romantic love has remained an ideal pursued by most (Illouz 1997: 2). Although it might seem contradictory, the ideal of romantic love is closely tied to the mass market and consumption (Illouz 1997: 2). This becomes apparent when taking a look at how advertising exploits the concept of love – which is still predominantly depicted as monogamous, heterosexual and teleological (i.e. resulting in family formation) – relating it to various forms of consumption, mostly with regards to leisure activities (Illouz 1997: 10ff.). Illouz observes that it is only a few consumer products which are connected to romance in advertisement, especially beauty products and romantic travel destinations (Illouz 1997: 83). This observation emphasizes that love in times of capitalism is closely connected to money, as self-enhancement as well as the shared consumption of leisure are marketed as central components of successful romantic relationships (Illouz 1997: 66). This of course, also implies that only those who have the means to afford these romantic goods can participate in the capitalist culture of romance, which is another factor contributing to social exclusion. In addition, it points out the ongoing sexualisation of women, as they are the primary target group of beauty products, the promise of ads often being that physical attractiveness results in happiness, love and wealth (for example thanks to a rich partner). *NW*'s characters, be they educated or school drop-outs, pursue this commercialized idea of happiness and romance. We have already seen that Natalie has internalized the male gaze of neoliberalism. With regards to Natalie's marriage, it is one in which consumption takes a central role. Not only does the couple purchase expensive real estate, but after their wedding, Natalie and Frank go on a luxurious honey moon, staying in a high-end resort: “113. *Luna di Miele (two weeks)* Sun. Prosecco. Sky, bleached, Swallows. Arc. Dip. Pebbles blue. Pebbles red. Elevator to the beach [...]” (235). However, the impressionistic, incomplete sentences create a sense that either Natalie or the narrator look critically on the stereotypes of luxury tourism and the fulfilment the latter promises, as if acknowledging their superficiality. Thus, we, the readers, are made aware of *NW*'s criticism of the commercialization of love. Moreover, even in the apparently protected environment of this luxury resort, the couple face questions concerning their origin due to their outward appearance: “‘Signora, where you from? American? [...] ‘This is your boyfriend swimming?’ ‘Husband.’ ‘He speaks very good Italian.’ ‘He is Italian.’ ‘And you, signora? *Di dove sei?*’” (237). This illustrates that the characters of *NW* can never escape their

origins – be it their socio-economic and geographic origin or their ethnic heritage. This can be traced back to the hegemonic idea of people who have made it to be white, ethnic minorities generally being disfavoured with regards to education and consequently social class. In spite of the fact that *NW* points out the social reality of class and social origin becoming more decisive in Britain than ethnic origin, the present passage still expresses stereotypes Natalie and Frank are confronted with due to their appearance which does not correspond to the average image of a wealthy British-Italian couple.

Felix too, representing the less fortunate *NW* characters, pursues wealth in order to reach interpersonal happiness. Not only does he himself want to rise socially, but he is to a large extent motivated by his relationship to Grace, for whom he wants to buy everything she desires: “He wished he could buy her the things she wanted.” (102). For Felix, it is normal and thus desirable to sustain a romantic relationship through material goods, the more so because in his current state, he can hardly do so. Considering the quotation, the parallelism applied in “he wished” and “she wanted” seems to be applied in order to emphasize the constructed nature of our material desires which we often would not be able to explain rationally. This is how advertisement and hegemonic culture work, creating desires for goods the acquisition of which – at least in our minds – would make us part of those happy people presented in the spots. Felix might not even know what Grace wants, however, to him, it is obvious that her desires are of a material nature and could thus eventually be fulfilled by him, provided that he possesses the necessary financial means. This mind set will prevent him of questioning the system he is inhabiting, in spite of the fact that he has repeatedly faced discrimination and difficulties. The fact that he is killed before having achieved social advancement might actually indicate the invisible barriers of a rigid class system which can hardly be permeated.

Sexuality, sexual orientation and the concept of romantic love are essential parts of social reproduction, and *NW* is rich in examples problematizing mainstream neoliberal ideas about these aspects of social reproduction. As we have seen in the literary analysis, Leah and Natalie both struggle in their relationships and have to hide various facets of themselves in order to be accepted, be it by their partner or society in general. Both women are probably oppressing homosexual desires, and Leah is unable to tell her husband about her refusal of having children. Natalie is frustrated in her marriage – the reasons are never mentioned; however, it is possible that the pressure of living the neoliberal idea of perfect love tires her – but her escape into extramarital affairs does nothing to make her feel any better. By the use of stylistically striking

phrases, *NW* emphasizes the artificiality of our ideas of beauty and love. However, the novel does not provide its characters with a way to escape these dominant concepts, which makes us see the lack of alternatives to mainstream capitalism.

3.3. Violence, Exploitation & Competition

An aspect often present in social relationships, particularly if they are hierarchical, is violence. In this paper, the focus is on violence exercised on women by men but also by other women. Violence in this analysis is not necessarily of physical nature, it comprises economic exploitation and competition. In *NW*, various forms of violence and/or exploitation are featured: sexual harassment, female competition, the exploitation of workers, as well as physical abuse.

Violence can take various forms, a look at *NW* will illustrate this point. Federici distinguishes between institutional violence, which, for the Western world, could for example be the glass ceiling hindering women to climb the career ladder due to hidden sexist structures in a company, and individual violence, which might be sexual harassment, rape or other forms of physical, as well as psychological violence:

To the institutional violence against women we must add the violence inflicted on them by individual men, mostly family members. Men take out on women their anger for their loss of economic power, and their reduced capacity to command women's labour and conduct. (Carlin; Federici: 6)

To begin with the most apparent form of violence, i.e. physical violence, in *NW*, Shar's situation has to be taken into consideration. Her experience of violence fits Federici's statement, suggesting that the lower the status of a man, the more the emotional and physical violence has to be endured by his partner. Already upon visiting Leah, Shar refers to the violence exerted by her former husband, though it cannot be identified whether her statements are true: "Ain't seen him in two years. Abusive. Violent. Had issues. [...]" (9). Later, in her encounter with Nathan, Natalie finds out that he is Shar's procurer and that she is one of several women who are exploited by Nathan. Therefore, (illegal) prostitution, which forms part of social reproduction, is another problematic issue depicted in Smith's novel. Due to her low social position and marginalization, Shar cannot expect any help, and she has no prospects to escape the social environment she inhabits, Leah's desperate attempt to hand her a self-help brochure certainly not sufficing. As in today's neoliberal world, work for those without sufficient education is

scarce, Shar hardly has any other options. Reporting Nathan to the police would most likely result in legal persecution of herself due to her illegal work and drug abuse.

As oppressive situations are interwoven with other power relations, they can also occur between women, for example when race and/or class is/are concerned (Mies; Federici: 10). This is apparent in *NW*, since Natalie employs maids from Brazil and Poland. In order to obtain more leisure time, Natalie hires a new maid: “Natalie Blake fired Anna and hired Maria, who was Brazilian. The basement was completed. A new arena of paid time opened up.” (298). Anna being from Poland, Maria being Brazilian, another current characteristic of social reproduction is illustrated in *NW*, that is that domestic labour nowadays tends to be outsourced to women from poorer countries of the Global North (Anna) or the Global South (Maria). The above quotation appears to reflect the way Natalie treats her maids, hiring and firing them without giving much consideration to their (financial) wellbeing. This could also be an indication of the lack of social security of these women and the precarious nature of their work, another typical characteristic of the precarious working conditions of women in neoliberal societies.

Federici emphasizes that societal change in general and equality between the sexes in particular are difficult to reach, essentially because those in the most powerful positions – also women – would not benefit from such an alteration:

Although many women have revolted against all kinds of ‘male chauvinism’, they often did not care to antagonize those on whom their jobs, their livelihood, depended. For middle-class women these were often the powerful men in the academic and political establishment or even their husbands. (Mies; Federici: 15)

This quotation illustrates that women often do not and cannot dare to revolt, as a deterioration of the situation of men would result in that of their own. This fact is illustrated in *NW*, for example in Natalie’s decision not to complain when she is appointed as a barrister to a Jamaican family due to her Jamaican appearance and family background. Persisting institutional sexism is illustrated in another passage of the novel, when Natalie is advised by an experienced female Jamaican judge: “[...] turn yourself down. One notch. Two. Because this is not neutral.’ She passed a hand over her neat frame from her head to her lap, like a scanner. ‘This is never neutral’” (242f.). Natalie is recommended not to show any kind of passion, as in a male-dominated professional environment of judges, her behaviour might be interpreted as “aggressive hysteria” (243). As discussed in the preceding section, women are reduced and judged according to their outward appearance to a much greater extent than men, even in

professional contexts, which is also illustrated in the present passage, as Natalie is told that her appearance (being a woman and of colour) is not neutral. Natalie is advised to be more restrained. By advising Natalie not to take action against inequalities at her workplace, her supervisor is indirectly protecting a conservative and discriminative system in spite of having been in a similar position as Natalie. Moreover, warning Natalie of her (passionate) behaviour to be judged as “aggressive hysteria”, the supervisor shows to have internalized neoliberal discourse of desirable female behaviour.

With regards to violence and sexism at the workplace, another bad experience made by Natalie is of interest. As a trainee barrister at court, Natalie is sexually harassed by a superior:

As Natalie Blake turned to shuck of her gown, Johnnie Hampton-Rowe appeared beside her, put his hand on her shirt, pulling it aside with her bra [...] With the same sleight of hand she'd just seen in court, he turned the fact of her shouting into the crime. (239)

Although Natalie can defend herself, her superior does not face any consequences: “‘What are you going to do?’ asked Leah Hanwell. ‘Nothing,’ said Natalie Blake.” (240). Since for Natalie, professional success seems to be of far greater importance than justice, she decides not to complain about her superior’s sexual harassment. Moreover, Natalie makes it clear to us that her superior has sexual relationships with other female colleagues of hers, indicating that this behaviour he has shown is considered normal by him and most likely even by some of the females affected by it. It appears that in order to succeed professionally, they accept their superior’s harassment or at least do not complain about it. Thus, violent men of *NW*, it seems, are not confronted with legal consequences, and it is emphasized that the higher the social rank, the more difficult it would be to punish their unacceptable behaviour.

As mentioned and discussed at earlier points of this section, violence can occur between women in the form of competition. This happens at the workplace and when hierarchy is involved, but in private relationships as well, as is the case of Leah and Natalie. In spite of having known each other since their early childhood, throughout the novel, it becomes clear that the two friends have lost the bond which connected them so closely in their teenage years. Due to diverging social, private and professional ambitions and ways of living, envy of the other’s life has emerged on both sides. Whereas Natalie imagines Leah’s relationship to be flawless and full of erotic moments, Leah admires her best friend’s estate and family, as well as her relationship, not without negative feelings towards Natalie: “She looks up at her best friend,

Natalie Blake, and hates her.” (61). The competition between the friends, albeit involuntary, hinders them from falling back on each other’s support, as neither Leah nor Natalie – in spite of officially being best friends – can confide in each other about their many problems, their current relationship being highly superficial. Relating the superficiality of Leah’s and Natalie’s friendship to neoliberalism, its idea of only sharing success and the responsibility of the individual for mental problems can be identified as reasons for Natalie’s and Leah’s pretentious behaviour. Moreover, since societal expectations towards women are at their highest when they are in their reproductive age, the deterioration of their relationship in the course of their adulthood can be explained. Both women have become individualistic and feel that they cannot share their secrets with their best friend. We know that they could benefit of a real friendship, as already talking about problems and being listened to certainly has positive effects on the well-being. However, not even more empathic Leah makes the first step and the two women thus remain lonely and misunderstood.

Violence is a central element of social relations, and therefore has to be included in a discussion of relations of social productions. As has been shown in this section, various forms of violence are featured in *NW*, from very apparent, physical violations to sexual harassment and more subtle forms of violence, such as institutionalised sexism and financial exploitation, as well as competition, for example between women. Therefore, *NW* achieves to illustrate the violent results of inequalities and hierarchical relations, which are mostly suffered by women and often occur in the context of social reproduction. The novel also takes up the problem of neoliberal competition between women, which has permeated Leah’s and Natalie’s friendship. In order to narrate new, and more equal ways of living and working, we are, however, in urgent need of characters, and particularly women, who collaborate and benefit from each other.

3.4.Labour of Love

3.4.1. Emotional Women – Rational Men

We have already seen how society relates women to their procreative duties and controls their sexuality. This practice is related to an even more subtle concept, namely the distinction between typically male and typically female qualities, which have already been referred to in the section on feminist economics. This passage aims to elaborate on society’s idea of female characteristics and how the latter are naturalized and used to accord a certain social position to women.

Our culture considers the home the right place for women, and despite considerable changes over the past decades, equality between men and women is far from being achieved. Looking at novels of the 18th century, the model of the nuclear family with the male breadwinner and the wife staying at home overseeing the household is easily recognized (Armstrong 2018: 2). This ideal of women conducting “a labour of love”, “reproductive labour” or “affective labour” which illustrates how women are associated with emotions whereas men are related to rationality, still persists (Armstrong 2018: 2):

Where male wage earners might be justified in demanding a living wage in return for labour performed for someone else, women could hardly put a price tag on tasks they were supposed to perform out of love. For a woman to claim entitlement to the same economic and political rights as a man was consequently tantamount to admitting that she was not actually a woman. (Armstrong 2018: 2)

The quotation above explains how our culture associates reproductive labour with women and has achieved to naturalize that the execution of this kind of labour should be entrusted to women. Naturalization of behaviour considered typically female or typically male results in internalization, which makes it difficult for men and women to change their behaviour and act contrary to what is expected of them (Seidler; Horniak: 94f.) To this day, most unpaid labour is conducted by women, and only recently, some European countries, such as Austria, have passed legislation which facilitates a – mostly very short – paternity leave, which is still the exception. Even though an international study conducted in 2013 showed that 85% of men in leading positions would prefer spending more time with their family and a better work life balance to money (Seidler; Horniak: 97), the current condition and image of men is in opposition to the outcomes of this study. Women, on the other hand, have to justify not staying at home with their children or doing so only for a very short period of time.

According to Nancy Armstrong – referring to Raymond Williams in her claim – we are still living in the belief – or we might not consider it at all – that the model of the male breadwinner and the female caretaker is natural that is a result of our sociocultural formation (Armstrong 2018: 15). It is William’s idea that the bourgeoisie’s lifestyle, and thus the gender-division with regards to family tasks, is slowly being adopted by the lower classes, until it reaches the proletariat (Armstrong: 15). This is well illustrated in *NW* as the ideal of lower-class characters, such as Felix, is being able to establish a family and to secure them economically.

Armstrong continues to explain that in modern capitalist societies, the existence of traditional households is necessary in order to secure the existence of their economic system (Armstrong: 17ff.). Debt, without which financing the bourgeoisie ideal of owning (a house, a car, etc.) is hardly possible, ensures the future of the national economy (Armstrong: 18). To summarize, the existence of families with one breadwinner and one caretaker is essential for the survival of contemporary societies, it is also for this reason that this way of living is still considered the ideal.

Looking at the protagonists of *NW*, Leah's choice to study philosophy – a subject with few career perspectives –, her sympathetic behaviour towards others, her choice to marry a man she loves from a shared socio-economic background as well as her rejection of capitalist values make Leah a *femina economica*. The following quotation is a description of her by her friend Natalie:

A generous person [...] Ceased eating tuna because of the dolphins [...] If there happened to be a homeless man sitting on the ground outside the supermarket in Cricklewood Keisha Blake had to wait until Leah Hanwell had finished bending down and speaking with [him], making conversation. (182)

However, Leah is considered a failure due to the lack of professional success and her naivety, as which her open and helpful behaviour towards strangers is seen by her environment. Her lacking career ambitions would most likely have been excused if she had carried out her maternal duties. Since Leah is childless without any prospects of having offspring, she, as well as society, seem to wonder about the meaning of her life. Leah is highly aware of her failure when contrasted to Natalie's life, and she has the answer for the different development of her best friend: "The break made the difference" (73), referring to the rupture of the two friends which occurred when they were 16 and lasted for more than one year. However, it is not clear whether this interruption of their relationship has had an impact on their personal development, as already before this break, Leah and Natalie have had different worldviews. Their differences become particularly apparent in the description of how the young women spent their last summer before university:

Leah:

[...] spend a large part of this final *NW* summer under the shade of an oak tree on Hampstead Heath, with an assortment of friends, a picnic, a lot of alcohol, a little weed.

Natalie:

[...] was working part-time in a bakery on the Kilburn High Road, and when she was not in the bakery she was in church, or helping Cheryl with the baby. At the bakery she was paid three twenty-five an hour. (201)

The quotes show the different priorities of the two women, which still characterize them in their adult lives. Whereas Leah lives (or would like to live) in the here and now and in the company of friends, Natalie defines herself through hard work and has always taken the responsibility for herself and her family. It is possible that Natalie's ambition, which cannot be found in Leah, is embedded in her ethnic origin, which might have forced her to work harder in order to achieve success. In addition, whereas Leah has grown up as an only child who had the security to be psychologically and (partly) financially supported by her parents, Natalie has grown up in a family with many children where time and money were scarce.

As we see, in contrast to Leah, from an orthodox economic standpoint, Natalie is a winner. In spite of her ethnic origin – her parents are Jamaican – she has climbed the career ladder, works as a barrister – “Anyway, I mostly do commercial these days.” (61) –, prefers work to leisure time and is married to a wealthy banker with whom she has two children. She has risen socially, and clearly adopted neoliberal principles of competition, individualism, and meritocracy. Regarding her career and value system, Natalie has adopted male characteristics, which are also reflected in her behaviour towards her assistant Melanie, whose role as a mother is not acknowledged by Natalie.

Natalie's social success is reflected in the change of her original name Keisha to Natalie, which is neutral and does not indicate her ethnic origin: “Natalie Blake? Actually in school she was Keisha. Natalie De Angelis now” (10). Natalie's belief in individual responsibility and meritocracy is not unjustified, as she herself has invested enormous strength in her personal development, and is described as an autodidact (73). From poor social origins, living in a tiny apartment with her parents and siblings, she is the only one of her family who is extremely successful at school and pursues university education, becoming a barrister.

From Natalie's own reflections on her choice to have children, we might conclude that the lack of empathy for her assistant's maternal feelings is due to the fact that these are unfamiliar to herself, as her decision to have children is a result of social expectations, and not to her own maternal desire to have offspring: “She had no intention of being made ridiculous by failing to do whatever was expected of her.” (272). This once again highlights Natalie's subordination to

neoliberal principles of leading a successful life, of which having children forms an essential part. It can be assumed that her lack of soft values is the reason why Natalie was able to become a successful barrister, as prestigious positions are hardly compatible with employees who want to spend a lot of time with their families, which is one reason why even nowadays, they are mostly occupied by men.

NW highlights the persisting presence of gender clichés. Soft values, presented by Leah, are hardly compatible with the current neoliberal system, which can be seen as the main reason why Natalie, who is depicted as a woman who has incorporated male principles, has gained professional success. Yet, Natalie's private life is far from fulfilling, which is reflected in Natalie's pursuit of extramarital encounters but also in the novel hardly depicting Natalie's and Frank's private life or in conversation, which gives the readers the impression that Natalie feels lonely in her marriage. The problem that neither Leah's emotionality nor Natalie's rationality help the two women to lead fulfilled lives could also be meant to illustrate the artificiality of this distinction and call for the equal appreciation of all human values, instead of relating them to economic interests. However, *NW* does not present any equable characters to us who could act as role models. Instead, the novel depicts two extremes, emphasizing the problem that soft values and a career can still hardly be combined. Stereotypes of male and female characteristics which persist and are made use of in our neoliberal times do not only play an important role in the conduction of domestic labour, which is mostly performed by women. It does also have a significant impact on the employment situation of men and women, which is the topic of the following section.

3.4.2. Paid versus Unpaid Work

Paid and unpaid work are closely related to social reproduction. Women do not only spend more time exercising unpaid labour, very often, they are also officially employed in fields that are considered to be extensions of the housewife condition, and therefore in the care sector, as is mirrored in the case of Leah. It results that averagely, women earn less than men, the latter generally working in sections related to more social prestige. The 21st century has not brought any release to women. Nowadays, it is expected of women to have a paid job and children. In addition, the crisis of the welfare state has transferred even more duties on to women. *NW* succeeds in illustrating these struggles, leaving its female characters torn between various duties and expectations.

From a Marxist perspective, all workers are exploited, no matter whether they are paid or not (Federici 2012: 16). However, the huge difference between paid and unpaid labour is that being remunerated defines work as part of a contract (Federici 2012: 16). It follows that unpaid labour lacks such a contract, and, what is more, it is largely not considered work at all:

The difference with housework lies in the fact that not only has it been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality [...] Housework was transformed into a natural attribute, rather than being recognized as work, because it was destined to be unwaged [...] In turn, the unwaged condition of house-work has been the most powerful weapon in reinforcing the common assumption that housework is not work, thus preventing women from struggling against it [...] (Federici 2012: 16)

Not being remunerated makes reproductive labour informal. Whereas even poorly paid workers more often than not do have the opportunity to organize themselves in order to require an amelioration of their working conditions; women usually have to complain in the private sphere, where they risk being ridiculed (Federici 2012: 16). Turning unpaid domestic labour into an “act of love” has thus been capitalism’s very successful way of saving a lot of money (Federici 2012: 17).

An apparent relation of power is established between the paid and the unpaid workers: “Since Marx, it has been clear that capital rules and develops through the wage, that is, that the foundation of capitalist society was the wage labourer and his or her direct exploitation” (Federici 2012: 28, 92). To this day, wage is “the separating line between work and non-work”, between “potential power and the powerless” (Federici 2012: 29).

The most apparent problem of men still being the major breadwinners in families is that women financially depend on them. Their status of primary earners, on the other hand, makes men dependent on their wage in order to sustain their families, and thus ensures the continuing existence of the capitalistic system (Federici 2012: 17). Men, in turn, depend on women, the latter comforting them emotionally and delivering “physical and sexual services”, which are considered as part and parcel of social reproduction by Silvia Federici (Federici 2012: 17).

Obviously, domestic labour is still largely carried out by women, it should be recognized as productive, since the productivity of the housewife is a prerequisite for male productivity and the basis of all forms of productive labour (Federici 2012: 31,47):

By separating the production of new life from the production of the daily requirements through labour, by elevating the latter to the realm of history and humanity and by calling the first ‘natural’, the second ‘social’ they have involuntarily contributed to the biological determinism which we still suffer today. (Federici 2012: 52)

Unfortunately, the fact that women produce life is reduced to a pure physiological function and not valued as productive (Federici 2012: 53f.) In the feminists’ interpretation of labour, however, the nuclear family, as a consequence, is seen as a “social factory” producing labour, and thus the foundation of capital accumulation (Federici 2012.: 31). Recognizing the value unpaid labour produces annually, their claim seems very plausible. The feminist movement in addition criticized the artificial separation of labour into productive and reproductive and demanded “wages for housework” (Federici 2012: 32f.). Unfortunately, to this day, their call has had few fruitful results.

There is no denying that a large number of men are involved in domestic labour and especially in childcare. Nevertheless, if one parent decides to spend more time at home in order to care for the children, it is mostly women. This again is due to the fact that men tend to earn more than women, which is why their salary “is crucial for the survival of the family” (Federici 2012: 33).

Calling for wages for housework is a demand which aims at making this kind of labour visible and at showing that “housework is already money for capital” (Federici 2012: 19). Federici expresses this rather drastically: “[...] capital makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking” (Federici 2012: 19).

Nowadays, more and more women are officially employed in addition to their conduct of domestic labour, which Federici describes as modern women having two jobs (Federici 2012: 20). Having a paid job, however, does not liberate women – apart from more financial freedom their employment might grant them – on the contrary, it increases their exploitation (Federici 2012: 20). Not only do women have to carry out the majority of domestic work, in addition, they spend hours at their work place. Since the realm of the private is not considered to belong to economics and economic production, this double burden of women remains largely invisible (Knoblauch 2019: 53). In spite of being characterized by technological progress, the 21st century has hardly seen any changes in the realm of the private (Federici 2012: 106f.). What has changed is that frequently, reproductive labour is outsourced and consequently performed

mostly by female immigrant workers, who are involved in child care, care for the elderly and the sexual reproduction of male workers (Federici 2012: 108). This phenomenon is called globalisation of reproductive work, which has led women from the Global South or poorer European countries to carry out tasks originally performed by housewives (Federici 2012: 11). In fact, nowadays, the majority of global migrants are female (Seidler; Horniak: 26). These migrant movements to the West have resulted in an “immense pool of cheap labour” and the capitalist accumulation of workers (Federici 2012: 70f.). It is proven that in general, migrants live under poor living conditions, more often than not work in the low-wage sector, and suffer social inequality (Seidler; Horniak: 168). Female immigrants in Europe often live under slave-like conditions, being sexually exploited and forced to prostitute themselves (Federici 2012: 72)

Another problem is that a large percentage of women are occupied in areas which might be described as “extensions of the housewife’s condition”, and thus in traditionally female jobs in the service and care sector (Federici 2012: 20). Not even having a career can be regarded as emancipation exclusively: “What is rarely acknowledged is that most career-type jobs require that you exert power over other people, often over other women, and this deepens the division between us” (Federici 2012: 59).

In the 1980s, the achievements of the feminist movement of the 1970s were contested once more with the revival of conservative governments and the diminishment of the welfare state, a process which has been ongoing since then (Mies; Federici: 15). Rationalization, computerization and automation of jobs in the service sector hit women particularly hard, as they are the first to be pushed out of stable and secure full-time employment, a fact that is reflected in the increasing number of women working in part-time jobs due to the lack of full-time positions (Mies; Federici: 15ff.):

They are in fact pushed into a whole range of unqualified, low-paid, insecure jobs which they have to do on top of their housework, which, more than ever, is considered their true vocation [...] and family is no longer a place where women can be sure to find their material existence secured [...] marriage for women is also no longer a guarantee of their lifelong livelihood [...] With jobs getting scarce, the league of men closes its ranks again and puts women again into their place, which is, according to many, the family and the home. (Mies; Federici: 16)

This quotation shows that the augmentation of precarity with regards to employment hits women to a greater degree than men, leading to the impoverishment of women in Western economies” (Mies; Federici: 16).

The ongoing retreat of the welfare state increases the levels of unpaid labour women have to carry out in addition to their formal, professional tasks (Mies; Federici: 17):

Increasingly, the socialized services (in health, education, information, transport) which in many countries were paid for by the welfare state, are again being privatized. This privatization means that women’s work as housewives will increase tremendously in the future. (Mies; Federici: 126)

This quotation highlights the correlation between the augmenting crisis of the welfare state due to neoliberalism, and the deterioration of the situation of women. The fact that more often than not, men are the ones being free to pursue their careers or at least to have jobs, results in the mancipation of women, who have to fulfil the tasks which ought to be carried out by the state (Mies; Federici: 110). Finally, work that is not remunerated is often imposed on women, be it in form of violence or psychological pressure (Federici 2018: 1393). In *NW*, this can be seen in the enormous pressure that is put on Leah by means of constantly reminding her of her reproductive duties.

Regarding the two female protagonists of *NW*, education and paid work are important markers of their integration in neoliberal London, which sets them apart from the lower-class environment of the housing estate where they grew up. Official paid labour is central in *NW*, and particularly highly successful characters (Natalie and Frank) identify themselves mostly through their official occupation: “The Blake- De Angelises started work early and tended to finish late [...]” (258). However, particularly with regards to unpaid reproductive labour, Leah faces enormous conflicts with her husband. Michel never criticizes Leah for having a job – most likely because the couple depends on two incomes – however, brutally expressed, he finds Leah’s unpaid reproductive labour dissatisfying, as she is not giving him any children. Therefore, Michel can be said to represent a still common view of women belonging to the private realm, at least partly, and that they have not fully succeeded in life before they have become mothers.

The female double burden of having an official occupation as well as the main responsibility for the physical and psychological well-being of their families is not only illustrated by Leah

and Natalie, but also by the situation of Natalie's assistant Melanie, who has a two-year old daughter and suffers a breakdown due to the fact that she has to pretend not having a child when at work: "'I just really need to not be here!' [...] 'Not all the time! The fact is I've got Rafs and I love her and I don't want to pretend that I don't have Rafs anymore [...]" (270). Interestingly, Melanie's statement surprises Natalie, who herself has two children. This is an indication of Natalie's incorporation of male values, which make her unable to recognize her assistant's desire to spend more time with her daughter. Natalie's lack of empathy draws our attention to the problem of compatibility of soft values and the professional world in a neoliberal economic framework, which has been discussed in the preceding section. This is the reason why the private life of employees is neglected, as in the case of Melanie. However, it is very likely that Natalie, too, does not mention her children and her maternal duties or feelings when at work. Therefore, instead of narrating a world in which women can have both, professional success and a fulfilling family life which they do not have to hide at work, Smith is presenting us with the more realistic situation of official labour and family being two separate aspects of life. This separation is unnatural and still forces women to decide between having a career or children. This is in accordance with the persisting problem that companies do not want to employ women who are likely to get pregnant, as well as the glass ceiling many women are confronted with after their maternity leave. A world of work which supports their employees in all aspects of their lives, for example by providing them with child care facilities, may still be considered utopic.

Leah, contrary to Natalie, is representative of the statistical reality that women work primarily in the care and service sector, she describes her job in a non-profit organisation as follows: "This work requires empathy and so attracts women, for women are the empathic sex." (31). It is needless to say that the working conditions as well as salary are rather poor. Leah herself sees her lack in professional success in her social origin and her gender:

[...] what happened to her classmates, those keen young graduates, most of them men? Bankers, lawyers. Meanwhile Leah, a state-school wild card, with no Latin, no Greek, no maths, no foreign language, did badly – by the standards of the day – and now sits on a replacement chair borrowed six years ago from the break room [...] Three years of useless study. (32f.)

This passage illustrates that even Leah has partly incorporated neoliberal values ("the standards of the day"), since her studies of philosophy seem "useless" to her due to her lack of career perspectives. Even Leah has internalized the capitalist assumption that occupations which bring

a maximum of money indicate success, no matter whether they allow you to lead a balanced life or fulfil you. Instead of being satisfied with her leisure time and the knowledge of providing help to people who are in need of it in her working time, Leah cannot escape social pressure and compares herself to the standard idea of success, which shows that in spite of being aware of some of the downsides of the system she is inhabiting, Leah is apparently too weak to counter it by vouching for her own values. Instead, she seems to be ashamed not to fulfil the expectations of her social environment: Leah faces disappointment about her lack of success on various fronts, her mother Pauline, for example, recalls that “ – [Leah] had a lot of potential [...] But [she] never really settled on the one thing [...]” (77). From this quotation we see that also Leah’s mother expected her daughter to find a more prestigious job than the one she has, not thinking of the possibility that Leah might not be interested in pursuing a career or earning a lot. Instead, Leah’s actually very positive characteristics, such as altruism and empathy for others, are ridiculed by her family and friends, most likely because they are in strong opposition to societal expectations of rational behaviour: “This is not the country for making a stranger tea” (8) – which Leah nonetheless prepares for the beggar she has let in her apartment. We can conclude that *NW* clearly criticizes the “standards of the day” which render Leah desperate. However, the novel does not provide us with a strong, self-confident woman who leads an alternative lifestyle. Instead, Leah feels depressed because of not fulfilling private (having children) and professional (having a career) expectations, and does not dare to share her criticism of society and its values, which is reflected in many of her thoughts and secret actions, with anyone.

As this section has shown, the artificial distinction of paid and unpaid labour, which is advertised by our capitalist system, benefitting from the fact that reproductive labour is largely unpaid, increases the inequalities between men and women, as it is particularly women who are responsible for reproductive labour and thus have less time and energy to work officially, which disadvantages them financially and often also prevents them from working in fields which would lead to their self-realization. In order to preserve this distinction, women are ascribed certain characteristics which justify why they should take the role as familial caretakers. In addition, as we see with Leah, women who are empathic face difficulties in the competitive professional and social environment. On the other hand, women who do not want to take the exclusive role of caretakers, illustrated by Natalie, to this day depend on the support of others, as in general, professional success means limited time for one’s family and children. Moreover, success in the most prestigious and competitive fields of official labour often pushes women to

be competitive towards other females, as we see in Natalie's harsh behaviour towards her assistant. Thus, *NW*, mirroring existing structures of our society, does not present us with female characters who have the opportunity to engage in private and professional self-realization. Instead, we are faced with two extremes, Natalie having incorporated all the principles necessary for professional accomplishment, but unable to create or maintain social bonds with others, and Leah, empathic and good-hearted, but ridiculed by her environment and too weak to stand by her values. The tension between private and professional fulfilment women face is related to another problem of neoliberalism, which is the belief in meritocracy and individualism, which is discussed in the following section.

3.5. *I am the Sole Author: Individualism, the Myth of Meritocracy, the Neoliberal City & Effects*

As I tried to illustrate in the preceding sections of this literary analysis, societal expectations permeate all aspects of social reproduction. In fact, as mentioned at the beginning of this main part, even the term social reproduction might be extended and used as a reference to our own (unconscious) re-enactment of behaviours and ways of living reserved for us by society. It has already been explained how social expectations are related to fertility, sexuality and relationships, as well as paid and unpaid labour. In addition, it has to be scrutinized how social expectations in *NW* are related to the neoliberal atmosphere of the setting of the novel. The belief in meritocracy, which is propagated by neoliberalism, as well the effects of individualism and life in a neoliberal metropolis on people, reflected in the characters of *NW*, are discussed in this section.

As pointed out extensively at earlier points, neoliberalism has already permeated culture and society, and in general, all aspects of our lives. This, we encounter on the first page of *NW*: Leah is listening to a radio programme and tries to write down a sentence which appears striking to her: "I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me" (*NW*: 3). Fittingly, McLeod describes this line as "[t]he normalization of neo-liberalism's approval of bourgeois individualism and self-centredness" (McLeod 2020: 616). Parts of the sentence seem to go through Leah's mind on this introductory page: "I am the sole – I am the sole author –" (3). The fact that this statement, which otherwise could be interpreted in many different ways, refers to the neoliberal idea of self-invention is underlined by Leah, who relates it to what Michel, her husband, would have to add to it (another empty sentence so many of us have internalized without thinking about its actual, rather brutal meaning): "Here's what Michel likes to say: not

everyone can be invited to the party. Not this century. Cruel opinion – She doesn't share it.” (3). On this page, and throughout the novel, fragments of this sentence are reappearing. I interpret this phrase as the cultural unconsciousness of the characters, most of whom are either desperately trying to adapt themselves to this neoliberal principle which has found its way into self-help programmes and books (Michel, Felix, partly Natalie) or fail to escape from it (Leah, Natalie, Annie). It is no surprise that non-fiction books advising individuals to improve themselves have known enormous popularity, they illustrate how neoliberalism has permeated the most private aspects of our life, forcing us to stay healthy, conform to body and beauty ideals, dress well and decorate our flats in a fashionable way. The phrase “I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me” further refers to the capitalist belief that individuals act rationally in a system that offers the same choices to everyone (Knoblauch 2019: 284). However, this ideal system of allocation excludes social realities such as sex, age and ethnic discrimination, which neoliberalism likes to hide, as we see throughout *NW*.

Jessica Gerrard points out that a “contemporary celebration of individualised pathways of success” can be constituted (Gerrard: 48), the latter being in line with the neoliberal idea of meritocracy, which has succeeded in permeating into our psychologies and value systems, as the reoccurring phrase of “the sole author” emphasizes. In spite of states usually acknowledging problems related to social inequality, it has become the responsibility of the individual to escape it:

In the context of neoliberal state governance, while structural or broader social inequalities are often acknowledged, policies more readily focus on the individual as the target of intervention and action. It is up to individuals to face, address and challenge inequalities in their lives. (Gerrard: 48)

As social expectations are perceived mostly unconsciously, we do seldom question them. However, social contexts have a direct influence on our identity (Knoblauch 2019: 290). Just like doing gender, to use Judith Butler's phrase, as has been stated at an earlier point, subjects of capitalist societies constantly reproduce the demands of the society they are inhabiting: “Wie wir uns am Leben erhalten ist weitgehend vorgegeben durch gesellschaftliche Anforderungen” (Knoblauch 2019: 301). However, this way of life in largely individualistic, competitive and unequal societies has negative impacts on our well-being, which is reflected in the depressive conditions of many of the characters of *NW*, as will be looked at in more detail in this section. Humans being social creatures, the neoliberal lifestyle presented to us as normal often renders us psychologically sick, which is mirrored in the fact that depression is a typical symptom of life in neoliberal societies, the illness being endemic in our modern times (Fisher 2009: 21). In

addition to the individualism most of us are faced with in neoliberal cities, capitalist principles of consumption and self-enhancement might lead to our feeling that “something is missing” which is due to the problem that we are made into believing that we constantly have to pursue pleasure and seek rewards (Fisher 2009: 22). Instead of seeing the fault in the system, we are likely to look for the problem in ourselves, having learnt to take responsibility for our own well-being. Therefore, changing the current neoliberal system is rendered even more difficult. *NW* illustrates this difficulty, and might have the potential to make us see that our current way of life is the origin of our emotional struggles.

Regarding *NW* and the neoliberal ideas discussed at the beginning of this section, we see that the secondary characters – Michel, Felix, Leah’s mother, Natalie’s cousin – are stereotypical representations of neoliberal ideas. They have internalized the core dogmas of the system they are inhabiting and believe in the idea of meritocracy, which becomes particularly visible in Michel’s and Felix’s assumptions and statements, both of whom being convinced of the idea of social advancement through hard work, the objectivity of the economic system and that deviating behaviour should be punished. Michel’s belief in the neoliberal system is expressed in the fact that he has started trading in his leisure time: “I’m trying to do this – because it’s pure market on there, nothing about skin, about is your English perfect, do you have the right piece of university paper [...] I can trade like anyone” (30). The fact that Felix and Michel have internalized these doctrines prevents them from critically questioning them, both men being of socially modest origins and of colour, which could be other explanations for their limited professional success. However, neoliberalism’s idea of equality of chances, which is celebrated in so-called multicultural cities as London, would be in contradiction with these reasons, which, it appears, Felix and Michel do not even want to think about.

On first sight, Natalie does also completely perform in accordance with neoliberal demands and has succeeded in the system, in spite of her modest social background and her ethnic origin. Education, self-investment and hard work have resulted in her professional success, paired with a stable marriage and two children. However, we know that Natalie is far from happy. She does hardly mention her dissatisfaction openly – though she once remarks on her marriage being an unhappy one: “It occurred to Natalie that she was not very happily married” (254) – , but the fact that she desperately searches for other people to meet in order to commit adultery indicates that she is missing something, which I imagine to be closeness and social relations. The problem, however, is that Natalie, despite her intelligence, seems unable to find constructive

methods to gain satisfaction or fulfilment, such as confiding in her husband or Leah. This can be explained through neoliberalism's idea of individualism – all her life, Natalie has been convinced to be the sole author of her destiny. Therefore, she does not consider the option of involving somebody else in her problems, not even her closest relations. Leah, who is of a much more empathic nature than Natalie, could certainly have helped her friend and might even have gained fulfilment by doing so, however, the once apparently close friendship of the two women is too superficial now for intimate confessions and talks.

In addition, Natalie's adoption of an online identity under which she is looking for sexual encounters may be read as a desperate attempt to break out of a lifestyle which is constructed on the denial of her own self and the regime of discipline which is necessary for Natalie in order to be successful in her job. However, the consequence is that she has lost her sense of self and does not know who she is anymore:

170. *In drag*: Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic. (282)

As this passage shows, Natalie's success was partly possible due to her adaption to the ruling system, or rather to the one most suitable and promising in a given situation, and she easily plays different roles. However, it also emphasizes that the denial of her origin, which culminated in her name change from Keisha to Natalie, has caused Natalie's alienation from herself. As the quotation stylistically highlights by means of naming Natalie's different disguises, Natalie is overloaded with the identities between which she has to switch, moving between her privileged marriage, her family and her occupation as a barrister. Therefore, we see that Natalie is never fully accepted, but has to hide aspects of her identity in order to fit into the given social context. This can also be seen as the reason why Natalie seeks to revisit her old life as Keisha, which makes her adopt the online identity of KeishaNW. Moreover, it is in line with an argument made at an earlier point, namely that particularly women hardly have the possibility to show and/or engage in their familial and maternal role when at work. In addition, the passage, juxtaposing Natalie's "rich drag" and "poor drag" highlights the importance of class and social origin with which Natalie has struggled all her life.

Natalie's psychological instability is certainly as severe as that of Leah, though it is not caused by a conscious disbelief in the hegemonic values of her time, which is illustrated in her reply

to Leah's statement featured in the preceding paragraph, which occurs on the last page of the novel:

Natalie frowned and folded her arms across her body. She had expected a more difficult question. 'Because we worked harder,' she said [...] We were smarter [...] We wanted to get out. [...] said Natalie, and carried on with her bright list, but it had by this point become automatic, self-referential, and her only real thought was of Frank and how much she wanted to speak to him. (336)

However, the passage indicates that Natalie is not really convinced of the neoliberal discourses she is repeating to Leah, as her arguments are part of a list and self-referential, moreover, Natalie is thinking of something else while presenting them to her friend. Thus, we can say that *NW*, on its last page, points out the artificiality of dominant discourses of meritocracy, as not even Natalie is really believing in them. She has, however, incorporated them because they have enabled her to advance in all fields of life. Therefore, this protagonist is unable to think of alternatives, and it appears that she is unwilling to question her value system, in spite of its obvious constructedness and bias. Thus, Natalie too fails in her attempt to escape her oppressive environment. A further interpretation could be that in spite of her dissatisfaction, Natalie is unwilling to abandon a luxurious life which she would not have without her husband and her prestigious job, alluding to the social reality that it is more comfortable to adapt to a hegemonic system than to revolt; which is what Natalie has done in order to advance socially.

Looking at Leah, her altruism is one cause for her existentialist crisis initiated at the beginning of the novel, when she opens her door to Shar, a local beggar and former school mate, in whom she seems to recognize herself: "They are the same age: thirties, midway, or thereabouts." (5). Finding out about having been betrayed by this woman, who has taken her money under the pretence of needing it for a taxi ride to her hospitalized mother, is the starting point of Leah's depression, the latter not so much being a cause of anger or disappointment, but much more caused by feelings of guilt, as Leah cannot accept that Shar has become a beggar while she herself lives a relatively comfortable life. Leah's personal crisis is an indication of her not having incorporated neoliberal values of competition, meritocracy, self-responsibility and the objectivity of economics, as she keeps asking: "Why that girl and not us?" (336). Leah, instead of her best friend Natalie and her husband, does not believe in equality of chances which is at the basis of neoliberalism. Unlike the other characters of *NW*, Leah does not ignore the most marginalized and socially disfavoured inhabitants of *NW* but begins to reflect about their lives and destinies, as well as the cruelty of a world in which the poor are criminalized and attempts

to help them are ridiculed. However, even Leah does not succeed to contradict standard neoliberal principles which blame the poor for their living conditions, which is apparent in the last passage of the novel, which, at the beginning, could have made us hope for Leah's question to be a starting point for the friends' shared social activism. Instead, at the end of the passage, Leah tells Michel and Natalie "[to] talk about something else" (336), which indicates that she too has opted to neglect the suffering of the marginalized, which is more agreeable than worrying about them.

Therefore, the last scene of *NW* indicates that Leah and Natalie remain within the social framework they have inhabited throughout the narration. In this respect, an observation of McLeod, who interprets Leah's and Natalie's reporting Nathan to the police as conforming to neoliberal expectations, i.e. taking part in the ostracizing of the people already on the margin, is of interest: "But there are other matters at work too, not least the demonization and pernicious erasure of those whose local presence evidences the failures of neo-liberalism's global schematics" (McLeod 2020: 618). It is their conformist behaviour that – at least superficially – reconciles the two friends in the end, they have found a common enemy and thus do not need to face their (inter)personal struggles.

More generally, Leah's depression is a consequence of life in a highly neoliberal environment, the demands and principles of which – as we have seen – are in stark contrast to Leah's own values. The main reason for Leah's discontent is that she does not have the power to escape this system which oppresses her and to find personal fulfilment outside the pleasure principle, which is the reason why most of the time, she is dissatisfied. It is unclear why in the novel, Leah is not given the potential to transgress and finally break out of the order that is subduing her, as she is at least dreaming of an escape with Shar after having run into her on the street, thus one more time alluding to her Lesbian desires. However, I read Leah's remaining in her marriage and life as Smith's exaggerated way of expressing the limited roles accorded to women. Additionally, the fate of Shar could also have a deterrent function, as Leah recognizes that an escape – at least on her own – would most likely result in her social decline and an increase in insecurity.

The superficiality of Natalie's and Leah's friendship is also the reason why Leah does not have anyone to confide in. In spite of appearing to be the character in *NW* with the highest potential of breaking out of the oppressing system she is inhabiting due to her at least partly present awareness of the falsehood of its promises, Leah does not succeed in doing so, which might

would have been different, had she had somebody interested in and willing to truly listen to her preoccupations. Being on her own, with a husband whose beliefs can hardly be disrupted by Leah, this character too enters a silent revolt which leaves her unfulfilled. By preventing herself from getting pregnant, Leah protests against expectations of her being a mother and society's ideal of the core family. However, Leah too fails when it comes to either confiding into somebody and/or thinking of alternative ways of life. In spite of being suspicious of the shortcomings and hidden aspects of the sole author slogan, which, in *NW*, is mirrored in Leah's deconstruction of and lack of identification with the phrase, Leah seems to be unable to take responsibility of her life or her personal interests.

One further possible explanation for the dissatisfaction of Natalie and Leah might be the neoliberal problem of insatiability. Obviously, we can never be satisfied in our current system, as it depends on our consumption. Therefore, new needs are created on a constant basis, the dictation of our system being comparison. We thus can never be rich, beautiful or happy enough, women being even more burdened due to their extensive reproductive responsibilities and the pressure they face with regards to finding a suitable partner.

With regards to the omnipresence of neoliberal discourses, the location of London is of great importance in *NW*. Geography is an interest of analysis because, as the title indicates, the novel is set mostly in the Willesden area of North West London. *NW* being a portrait of a post-crisis capitalist society, the constant pressure for, lack of and awareness of time can also be interpreted as a symptom of the stress and anxiety caused by living in a metropolis characterized by acceleration. As discussed in the theoretical part of this paper, Zadie Smith herself is highly aware of the problems of the financialisation of cities, a symptom of neoliberalism which leaves hardly any room for those who cannot afford to consume goods and services. These characters are marginalized, and pushed into oblivion, if recognized, then as nuisance, unproductive people occupying public space, like Shar, Nathan and partly Felix in *NW*. Moreover, the typical location of neoliberalism and its proclamation of self-responsibility and individualism is the city, where anonymity renders possible a life of egoism without much obligation. This is also the reason why Leah's attempt to help Shar is ridiculed by her family and friends who could not imagine helping a stranger, Leah's behaviour is considered deviant, as it does not conform to the neoliberal principles of individualism and self-responsibility, which are in contrast to the natural need of human beings to form social relationships and to help each other.

Although the majority of *NW* is set in North-West London movement plays a role in the novel, a fact which Beatriz Pérez Zapata observes: “Zadie Smith’s characters are frequently on the move” (Zapata 2019: 64). And it is indeed by moving through London that the protagonists of *NW* bring us, their audience, from the geographical margin to the centre and back again, relating events to us. What Zapata claims about Smith’s latest novel, *Swing Time*, is equally true for *NW*:

The movements of many of these characters are drawn by their search for freedom outside the limits that their origins impose because, contrary to the alleged rootlessness of global and glocal societies, the fact is that roots do still matter in Smith’s writings. (Zapata 2019: 64)

Zapata’s statement is in line with what Marcus emphasizes concerning geography in Smith’s oeuvre, and hence the fact that “where we live” determines our chances of success in life (Marcus 2013: 70). The reality that socio-economic and geographic origin are decisive for the future is referred to throughout the novel, for example in a conversation between Natalie (poor background) and Frank (wealthy background): “ – Why is it that everyone from your school is a criminal crack head? – Why’s everyone from yours a Tory minister?” (62). This mocking conversation between the couple does not only mirror social realities of the heredity of class but also expresses their lack of empathy towards the poor who are pushed into crime and /or addiction.

This social and geographical margin, Willesden in North West London, forms the geographic origin of the majority of the characters of *NW* (Natalie, Leah, Nathan, Felix, Shar). In addition, it constitutes the low socio-economic background of these figures, who have grown up in the Caldwell Tower Blocks and attended a state school with a rather poor reputation. Their common geographic and thus social background bounds the characters together and relates them throughout the course of the novel, which is illustrated in Leah’s encounter with Shar, in which the latter identifies a common ground: “-Wait – you went *Brayton*?” (9). This literal common ground connects the characters throughout the novel. Leah and Natalie, for example, know their ground of origin: “[Leah] knows the way people speak around here, that *fuckin*, around here, is only a rhythm in a sentence.” (5) and in spite of their university education and success remain in the area (even Natalie lives in NW, although in a ‘posher’ part than Leah). In spite of repeatedly being confronted with their less fortunate former school mates, there is still only a very limited degree of solidarity, since, apart from Leah’s failed attempt to help Shar, the general attitude against rather unfortunate characters is that they constitute a danger and live off other people’s money. Therefore, I assume that Smith has her characters bump into each other

in order to contrast their live paths, and to illustrate that even a shared social origin does not result in empathy in a world ruled by competition. The general attitude of *NW*, i.e. that everyone deserves what they get, is a reflection of the neoliberal idea of meritocracy which ignores the fact that there is no equality of chances and that even in highly developed cities of the West, such as London, people have to struggle in order to have access to the most basic needs, mostly on their own, due to austerity and the consequential ongoing retreat of the welfare state.

In *NW*, Smith establishes contrasts between the poor and the wealthy parts of London, indicating the degree of segregation in the city. After her argument with Frank, who has found out about her online identity, Natalie heads to Willesden, where she runs into Nathan with whom she consequently walks through the streets, which helps the readers explore the setting of *NW* and Leah's and Natalie's ground of origin, which, in the course of the novel, is contrasted to modern, financially important parts of the city, which becomes apparent in Leah's description of the office she works in: "Elsewhere in London, offices are open plan/ floor to ceiling glass [...] Here is not there. Here offices are boxy cramped Victorian damp" (31). London in general is depicted as a segregated city in *NW*, which is one of the reasons why social mobility is so difficult to achieve: "The world of council flats lay far behind them, at the bottom of the hill. Victorian houses began to appear, only a few at first, then multiplying. [...] Some of these houses are worth twenty times what they were worth a decade ago. Thirty times." (314). This too can be read as a reference to the before mentioned financialization of cities in times of neoliberalism, which leaves no room for the lower and middle-classes and thus ignores the needs of the majority of the population, resulting in a system which reproduces its inequalities.

In addition, *NW* represents negative aspects of the commercialization of cities, the church Leah attended as a child, for example, has been converted into luxury apartments. Locality is lost and replaced by global chains and products: "On the way back from the chain supermarket where they shop, though it closed down the local grocer and pays slave wages [...]" (82). It is the representation of a city which only has a place and kindness for people with the necessary capital, leading to the lack of belonging of marginal, economically disadvantaged people. That this neoliberal city leaves people lonely and alienated, humans actually being social creatures who depend on networks.

The meaning of social reproduction can be extended to include our own subjugation to dominant social principles and the acceptance of roles accorded to us by society. *NW*

extensively features this meaning of social reproduction, as it presents its characters as mostly unconsciously caught in a tight network of neoliberal expectations. Whereas the secondary characters try everything to fully adapt to the system, Leah and Natalie are aware of its disastrous downsides. Natalie might not accept her own recognition of the failure of a system from which she benefits, which leads to her feeling of alienation and her attempt to revisit her old life. From Leah's thoughts, we know that she is highly critical of her capitalist and competitive environment, as well as social expectations she does not want to fulfil. As she, however, is not able to openly criticize the system and her social environment, she revolts in a silent way, which seems to lead to even more suffering on her part. The general mood of *NW* is pessimistic, most of its characters, no matter whether they are wealthy or poor, are in rather depressive states and Felix, whose name means lucky, and who can be considered as the only optimist of *NW*, is killed in the course of the novel, which is a strong message of Smith. Living in an anonymous, more and more socially segregated global city contributes to the characters' feeling of loss and loneliness characteristic of our times. The novel closes as pessimistically as it has started, as Leah and Natalie continue to ignore the social problems which lead to their oppression.

3.6. Outcasts in *NW*: (Missing) Roles in Social Reproduction

In addition to the discussion of female lives in neoliberal societies, a brief focus on the outcasts of *NW* has to be included in this analysis, especially because it illustrates what happens to characters who refuse to take the places society accords to them. An argument introduced in this section is that the novel illustrates that – particularly if they are conforming to social expectations – women may find it easier to be included in society than men do, as the examples of Felix and Nathan show. In contrast to Natalie and Leah, who still mostly conform to social expectations, a female character who is on the margin of society due to voluntary disobedience of interest here is Annie.

Regarding the difference between men and women in *NW*, an important point which demands elaboration is that it seems that women of disadvantaged social origins are luckier than their male counterparts. Whereas Leah and Natalie might have expected their adult lives to turn out differently, both have husbands, a home and a stable job. This cannot be said of their former school mate Nathan, who is regularly imprisoned and might be involved in the murder of Felix, another man from the neighbourhood who, just as he seems to be on the way to a stable life,

wishing to establish a family with his ambitious girlfriend, is stabbed, both men are of African/ Caribbean descent. This difference between the fate of black men and women in *NW* is remarked by Slavin, who assumes that Nathan Bogle and Natalie Blake can even be regarded as a kind of twins (as their names have the same initials), who should have had the same life chances, but, in fact, Nathan has got off the straight and narrow in his early youth and since then never recovered (Slavin: 117).

Felix is a neighbour of Leah and Natalie in their NW area, the 32-year-old Jamaican is a former drug addict who is on his way to a stable life before he is stabbed in the streets for a trifle, after having told two young men to leave a seat to a pregnant woman on the underground. From a heterodox economic perspective, he is of interest because he believes in meritocracy and his own responsibility for his success or failure, which is partly due to his passion for self-help books such as “*Ten Secrets of Successful Leaders*” (132). He sees himself as prospering: “I’m moving up in the game and I’m ready for it” (158). His values become apparent in his conversation with Annie (cf. Annie). Nevertheless, Felix has no opportunity to succeed, as he is stabbed in his own neighbourhood, he has not been able to escape his circumstances.

Nathan went to Brayton with Keisha and Leah, they are the same age and the two girls were fascinated by him as children and teenagers. Nathan, who has African roots which are not further explained, lives on the streets of NW and is a criminal as well as a drug addict. In the night of Felix’s murder, Natalie meets him on these streets, leading to her suspicion of his involvement in the murder.

Nathan is presented as highly aware of the discrimination he has had to face in the course of his life:

That’s one piece of truth my mum did speak. Everyone loves a bredrin when he’s ten [...] All cute and lovely. Everyone loves a bredrin when he’s ten. After that he’s a problem. Can’t stay ten always. [...] There’s no way to live in this country when you’re grown. Not at all. They don’t want you [...] Ain’t the same for girls, it’s a man ting. (315)

Unlike Felix, Nathan has never tried to escape his circumstances. He seems pessimistic and has accepted his faith. From a heterodox economic viewpoint, we could thus interpret Nathan as a character who has seen through the empty promises of neoliberalism and knows that society does not accept him due to his social and ethnic origin. It is striking that Nathan comments on the fact that females of similar origins – such as Natalie – meet less resistance. This could be

due to the fact that women are considered weak, and thus not seen as equal competitors by wealthy white men. *NW* does not offer a narrative which assigns a fulfilling role to this character, which I relate to Smith's realism and her strong social criticism, giving Nathan a second chance would be in contrast to how difficult it is for excluded characters to rise socially, particularly if they have been involved in criminal activities.

With regards to the female outcasts of *NW*, Felix's former lover Annie is of interest in a heterodox feminist economic approach to *NW*. Annie is the outcasted daughter of an aristocratic family, about 40 years old and described as a heavy substance abuser. She lives in a little flat leading to a roof-top terrace which she never leaves and is one of the very few characters of *NW* who do not inhabit the area of NW.

Her mode of thinking about life is in stark contrast to that of Felix, who has incorporated a neoliberal ideology and has given up Annie in order to live with his much younger and ambitious girlfriend, Grace. Upon his last visit to her flat, Annie presents her realistic view on society to Felix: "That's what people are for. They take advantage of each other. What else are they for?" (151). Asked about her life goals by Felix, she replies: "The bad news is everybody dies at the end. Game over" (158).

Annie is not only against having a conventional life which would include having children, but she can also be characterized as being a feminist critical of one-sided relations of power which are manifested in legislation, for example:

You realize of course that if it were the other way round there would be a law, there would be an actual law: John versus Jen in high court. And John would put it to Jen that she did wilfully fuck him for five years, before dumping him without warning in the twilight of his procreative window [...] not everyone wants this conventional little life you're rowing your boat towards. I like my river of fire. And when it's time for me to go I fully intend to roll off my one-person dinghy into the flames and be consumed. (160f.)

However, Annie's honesty and decision to live a life contrary to societal expectations has led to her ostracism: Her family has cut all relations to her, and Felix abandons their romantic relationship, as he seeks stability and a conventional relationship with a woman who wants to create a family with him: "You're forty-whatever. Look at you. You're still living like this. I want to have kids. I want to get on with my life" (162). As Annie's reproductive age has almost passed, she is of no interest to him any longer. It is sad that *NW* does not allow Annie to be an

active part of society. As the quotation above shows, Annie is an ardent critic of society's current state, in particular when it comes to the inequalities between men and women concerning procreation. However, Annie remains a theorist who does not engage in any kind of real life. Instead, similar to Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she remains in her attic, only letting Felix know what she thinks about social expectations and institutionalised sexism. Permitting Annie to actively take part in the happenings of the world would achieve some female emancipation, however, in accordance to reality, Annie, in refusing marriage and children takes a marginal spot, particularly with the end of her reproductive life span approaching. As we have seen by observing Annie's case, *NW* does not present any single women to us who consider themselves and their lives as happy and meaningful. There is no doubt that in our society, independent strong women who do not depend on their partners exist, which is also reflected in the increasing numbers of single women and mothers. Nevertheless, *NW* is a pessimistic novel about the crisis of neoliberalism and expresses the difficulties of women – which in reality are, as we have seen, generally greater than that of men – in a hyperbolic way, which has most likely made it necessary for Smith to depict one of the worst possible scenarios of aging as a single woman, since it is apparent that Annie, in spite of denying it, is feeling desperate and is in urgent need of social relations.

To conclude the brief survey of these marginal characters of *NW*, they all have in common that they are not capable of transgressing the social roles adjusted to them without negative consequences. This is most clearly visible in the case of Felix, whose wish to leave his modest background leads to his death. Nathan does not even believe in his own capability to escape his circumstances. He thus is tolerated in his existence as a criminal who is likely to either die young or to end incarcerated. Annie, the one of them who is of upper-class origin, is punished for not wanting to accept her societal role too. Had she done what was expected of her – marrying a man of her own class and having children with him – she would have ended living in a wealthy neighbourhood and free of existential worries – at least on the surface. Her decision to live independently and without a stable relationship has resulted in abandonment. She is not in touch with her family, and Felix does not intend to visit her ever again, which he explains to her during his last visit. As mentioned, the apparent failure of these characters can also be interpreted as their strength, they have recognized that their oppressive environment does not allow them to take roles which are not predestined for them. However, *NW* does not counteract the downsides of this system which it nevertheless heavily criticizes by imaging alternative, more fulfilling lives for these marginal characters.

4. Conclusion

The main idea of this approach to an analysis of literature, taking a heterodox feminist economic framework, is to point out that all aspects of our life are shaped by the dominant economic system we are inhabiting, which currently is neoliberalism. Therefore, I tried to decode the neoliberal promises of meritocracy and progress from a feminist economics approach, showing that our economic order is not objective but to the contrary has devastating effects, which is reflected in augmenting levels of inequality and the frequent occurrence of crises, in the context of *NW*, this is the financial crisis of 2008, the consequences of which are still suffered by the general public, and especially those on the margin of society. In addition, *NW* depicts the psychological effects of living in an individualist, insecure and competitive environment, London being a global city characterized by urban inequality and the neoliberal organization of places. As economics is linked to all other social systems, the decision to relate the novel *NW* to feminist economics and the concept of social reproduction appears promising, in particular because culture and literature reflect and thereby criticize social conditions and are needed in order to imagine and consequently narrate alternatives to current precarious economic and therefore social circumstances. Moreover, this combination of the humanities and social sciences in a literary analysis is in contrast to the otherwise often rigid and unnatural sharp distinction between different academic fields, which is another result of neoliberalism.

The main interest of this analysis of *NW* is to analyse and explain why it is particularly women who are disfavoured by our current social system, for example due to the ongoing retreat of the welfare state, the deregulation of employment, the artificial distinction into paid and unpaid work leading to the problem that a large part of work belonging to social reproduction is not remunerated; as well as due to the neoliberal principles ruling our society, which include competition, the exclusion of soft values and heteronormative ideas concerning family formation. Considering the difficulties and mental struggles of the two female protagonists of *NW*, it becomes apparent that women are affected by the neoliberal organization of every aspect of our lives to a larger extent than men.

Regarding the concept of social reproduction, which is of central interest to feminist economics, the latter considering social reproduction to be the basis of economic thinking and acting, this thesis presents a historical overview of the concept and discusses the difficulties surrounding its definition, as a variety of elements might be included in the concept. According to the definition of social reproduction formulated in this thesis, we have seen that the concept refers

to all activities which ensure the existence and functioning of society and comprises elements of production and elements of reproduction. In addition, social reproduction can be seen as the reproduction of social expectations and dominant discourses by individuals, as unmistakably illustrated by Zadie Smith, for example through the hyperbolic style featured in *NW*, which she uses in order to illustrate the artificiality of neoliberal beliefs which have entered the minds of the characters. As women are the main agents of social reproduction, the literary analysis of *NW* applies these theoretical assumptions of social reproduction to the examination of the novel, primarily focusing on the two female protagonists. However, secondary characters are of interest too, as they either serve as representatives of neoliberal ideas and values or symbolize the socially marginalized.

Social reproduction is the central element of Smith's novel. This can already be recognized as highly progressive, as we can be certain that the novel's aim is to draw attention towards persisting inequalities and the dangers of hegemonic neoliberalism. Furthermore, the struggle of women presented in the novel draws our attention to the problem that most elements of social reproduction, such as emotional care or child care, are still not highly valued or regarded as work. As Smith is a feminist author with a high awareness for social issues, this is no surprise. Her work can certainly be said to have the potential to engage the readers to reflect on current social developments and the omnipresence of hegemonic neoliberal discourses. The critical reading of her novel might even lead people to question the capitalist system they are inhabiting. Particularly younger readers who have been born into highly financialized, neoliberal societies might start to think about dominant economics, something they otherwise might not have done, as, according to Mark Fisher, "[f]or most people under twenty in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue" (Fisher: 8). Reading *NW* at least calls for a consideration of alternatives to the dominant system.

Therefore, with regards to the revolutionary potential of culture and literature in particular, we might at this point conclude that *NW* is in many ways a politically aware work which demands its readers to reflect on the realist economic setting of the novel. Ignoring the social criticism in *NW* is hardly possible, and as the novel was published in 2012, only a few years after the beginning of the financial crisis, even less so.

To begin with, *NW* presents us with characters representative of ordinary individuals all of us could know. Therefore, social issues become much more graspable than, for example, in

theoretical texts or newspapers. All the characters have incorporated values, beliefs, discourses and desires which appear strikingly familiar to the ordinary reader, such as ideas about romantic love, founding a family, achieving success and being wealthy, they are personae of capitalism, uttering statements we all have heard and used repeatedly (for example Michel's "not everyone can be invited to the party", 3), without thinking about their actual meaning, as they form part of omnipresent neoliberal discourses. By presenting them to us, often in a hyperbolic manner, Smith allows us to, maybe for the first time, critically reflect on their actual underlying meaning and its implications, and to ask ourselves whether we really believe in them.

Not only does *NW* uncover the omnipresence of neoliberal doctrines, it goes into detail when it comes to the effects they have on the individuals confronted with them. This concerns the marginal characters of the novel, who are excluded because they do not behave according to the script of their society, and, to an even larger extent, the women of *NW*. As discussed in the main section of the thesis, almost all aspects of social reproduction are featured in Smith's novel, and the analysis of the latter has highlighted the many difficulties women have to face due to gender inequality and increasing social pressure, for example with regards to having children and being successful in the professional life. More oppressive aspects of gender inequality, such as exploitation, harassment and physical abuse are also depicted in the novel, thus raising awareness to the persistence of private and institutionalized violence.

The analysis of *NW* shows that society still considers it a female duty to found a family and holds on to the heteronormative idea of how we should spend our lives, which means that after getting educated, we marry and finally have children. In spite of indirectly criticizing this system by depicting how it constrains women, Smith leaves open how alternatives to these normative ideas of fertility and procreation, as well as (social) life in general, might look like.

Sexuality is depicted as ambiguous in *NW*, which presents the various taboos surrounding sex and fertility to its readers. Leah and Natalie both find themselves in oppressive sexual relationships, and *NW* indicates that even in our apparently advanced, egalitarian society, women are often reduced to nature. Moreover, the novel points out the constructedness of our capitalist heteronormative culture of romance, which is nevertheless pursued by the characters of *NW*.

With regards to violence, in *NW*, various forms of violence and/or exploitation are featured, for example sexual harassment, female competition, the exploitation of workers, as well as physical abuse. It becomes clear that it is primarily women who suffer these diverse forms of violence and that very often, relations of hierarchy are involved in them, making it all the more difficult to prosecute the people exercising violence and abusing their power.

Concerning so-called female and male characteristics, an analysis of *NW* shows society's idea of women being emotional and altruistic and how they are therefore accorded a certain social position. *NW* highlights the artificiality of these naturalized characteristics by depicting two female characters, one of whom is emotional, the other rational, and neither of them is fulfilled, indicating that our society still lacks the equal recognition of diverse human values, and that we are in need of balance between our personal and professional lives. The novel exclusively features characters who have either fully incorporated standard neoliberal ideas of success which, nevertheless, lead to their suffering, or who are conscious of the limits of neoliberalism but are unable to act against the pressure it puts on them.

Due to their own unconscious re-enactment of behaviours and ways of living reserved for them by society, as well as the post-crisis neoliberal atmosphere in London, the characters of *NW* do not manage to break out of a system which is undermining them. Neoliberal ideas of meritocracy exclude social realities such as sex, age and ethnic origin as reasons for exclusion and discrimination. *NW* depicts characters who are depressed as a consequence of competition, individualism, pressure, consumerism, and the pessimism characteristic of our and draws attention to this problem. However, in spite of Natalie and Leah being (partly) aware of the limits and lies of neoliberalism, their crises remain unsolved and they are too weak to revolt actively, which results in *NW*'s inability to present any alternatives to our current hegemonic way of life. Even the outcasts of the novel, whose potential of seeing the limits of upward mobility for the marginalized must be recognized, are not able to break out of the system that is oppressing them, at least not in a constructive, live-affirming way.

Focusing on the economic and social alternatives works of literature could present to us, a critical reading of *NW* leads to the conclusion that the novel does not present us with a happy ending in the sense that we might imagine Natalie and Leah to reflect upon their own lives and what they really want to make out of them. This is partly expressed by Leah's immobility – she is still sitting in the hammock of the communal garden in the last passage of *NW*, exactly the same spot as at the beginning of the novel – but also by the two friends abandoning important

subjects in order to talk about something else (which very probable is of trivial nature). I imagine that both women will reconcile with their husbands, and Leah might in the end be persuaded to have children. It is true that both women have tried to revolt against oppressive social structures, however, neither of them successfully.

Particularly Leah, who appears to have more freedom, being childless and not burdened with extensive professional responsibilities, does not fulfil the reader's hope to act up and break out, in spite of obviously being dissatisfied with her life. Leah's only protest is her refusal to have children. If she was courageous enough to openly state her wish to remain childless, this personal decision would be powerful. However, by hiddenly taking the contraceptive pill and by undergoing secret abortions, Leah, on the surface, stays in the position of a woman conforming to social expectations. As she never utters her refusal of having children to anyone, not even her friend Natalie, it is very likely that her behaviour will just be interpreted as insecurity or the fear of parenthood. Yet, her decision against having children might be due to serious considerations, such as problematic living conditions of the future generations or the rejection of being a mother and housewife. Thus, Leah's behaviour mostly causes more suffering on her part, which, throughout the novel, steals all of her power, probably, eventually, leading in her acceptance of social demands.

Natalie tries to break out of her unfulfilled family life by means of extramarital sexual encounters under her old identity, Keisha, associated with the grounds of her childhood and youth. However, already by creating an internet profile in order to find intimate partners, she is bending to sexist standards, which the reference in the novel ("everyone is looking for a BF 18-35") illustrates. It remains unclear why Natalie is engaging in these relations, but it is very probable that she has lost herself during her self-invention and tries to get back to her old self. In spite of her husband discovering her online activity and her online identity, it is unlikely that this rupture in their relationship will result in a promising new beginning of their marriage. If anything, they will reconcile and live as before. If Frank divorces from Natalie, their children are likely to stay at their mother's place, and Natalie will afford it to employ maids who look after them. Like Leah, Natalie is unable to communicate with her social environment, she cannot express her real feelings to her husband or her best friend, and I have the impression that not even she herself is aware of how unfulfilled she is in her current life. In this point, she differs from Leah, who – in spite of not telling anyone – is aware of her own unhappiness. Natalie's clinging to the carefully constructed façade of a perfect life indicates how deeply

she has incorporated dominant ideas about personal and professional success. She is not able to turn into another direction.

In spite of the apparent harmony between Natalie and Leah in the last section of the novel, *NW* generally presents the once close friends as competitors, Natalie seems not to be able to utter her personal feelings, she might not even know what they are anymore. Instead, she tries to calm Leah with a speech she could have made in front of practically any audience. Leah, on the other hand, does not dare to contradict, or she might simply lack the power to do so. In spite of her certainly feeling the break in their connection, she is unable to discuss it with Natalie, just as she is unable to present her true opinion about founding a family to her husband. Thus, social cohesion is lacking in both, society in general, reflected in the ostracism of marginal figures, and in interpersonal relationships, such as Leah's and Natalie's friendship.

This is most likely meant to emphasize neoliberalism's idea of the perfect citizen, the rationally thinking and acting economic individual. Regarding the social and geographical environment of its characters, *NW* presents as with a neoliberal city characterized by individualism, isolation, marginalization and the rigid geographical division between the wealthy and the poor, as well as loneliness. This unpleasant atmosphere is a call for a change of the way our modern lives are organized. Unfortunately, Smith leaves open how she imagines a people and life friendly city; but we can turn to the economist Kate Raworth's image of a healthier organization of human life: What would be needed is an economic human point of reference that takes into account that humans are highly social beings whose basic need is to have social relations, as we, homo sapiens, are "the most cooperative species" (Raworth: 104). In order to live more consciously and in happier ways, social relationships and connections have to be re-established to replace our material abundance by an emotional one (Raworth: 282f.). Particularly with regards to the importance of social reproduction, human cooperation, which we hardly find in *NW*, would be needed in order to reduce the workload of women.

In connection to the neoliberalist ideas of meritocracy, competition and individualism, the criticism of *NW* has to refer to the one ostracized woman in the novel, Annie. Annie is a perfect example of what happens to women who do not want to conform and thus face social exclusion. Due to her refusal to found a family, Annie is abandoned by her lover, Felix, as well as her family, who has not been able to persuade her to marry. As quoted in the main part of this literary analysis, Annie has good reasons for her anger, she reasonably points out the limits and constraints of our contemporary, persistently sexist societies. Yet, also this character is not

granted the power of real rebellion. Annie never leaves her attic, she does not seem to have an occupation, and her solitude has led her to a self-harming substance-abusive behaviour. Apparently, it is almost impossible for a woman to be independent and fully included in society at the same time. The character of Annie would have had feminist potential. However, I assume that by limiting all her (female) characters, *NW* intends to point out almost social and gender boundaries which are almost impossible to transgress, if so in an exaggerated way.

The lack of alternatives for its female characters does not necessarily have to be interpreted as a shortcoming of *NW*. Rather, it can be related to the novel's accurate – albeit humorously exaggerated – depiction of contemporary social conditions, which are characterized by a lack of real alternatives. Awareness of persisting social inequalities and the limitations and restraints present in every society, to which *NW* contributes, is an important condition and prerequisite for real social change which starts in our heads.

As I have tried to point out in my literary analysis, *NW* is a socially aware novel which highlights the devastating conditions of humans in general and women in particular who live in the age of neoliberalism. So far, an analysis of *NW* focusing on social reproduction shows that for women, it is hardly possible to have it all. Consequently, it is clear that a critical reading of *NW* from a feminist heterodox economic viewpoint must lead us to demand a new social and economic model which includes and appreciates all aspects of social reproduction (Knoblauch 2019: 121). This means that co-operation as well as human relationships should be the basis of social life, all citizens ought to be enabled to realize their potential (Knoblauch: 122f.). Particularly from a feminist viewpoint, production and reproduction should no longer be separated and that there is an urgent need to change and overthink the still persisting male concept of paid labour (Knoblauch: 136). Before these social changes can be realized, we are in need of culture and literature to make these alternatives to our current dominant social and economic framework imaginable and to anticipate developments for the better. Augmented interest in literary works of fiction and non-fiction about economic conditions indicate that the general public is open for narratives of change, which is needed in order to make alternative economic systems imaginable.

This is the place to repeat the short-sightedness of our dominant economic system. Fortunately, people have become aware of the need for a change towards a leading economic framework which does not exclude anyone and is based on the well-being of humans and the environment.

At the beginning of the 21st century, we would have the opportunity to take crises – be it the financial, climate or our current health crisis – as turning points and start to live in accordance with our social and natural environment. A fairer economic system embedded in society adjusts importance to aspects of life currently neglected in considerations, such as households, families and future generations. Equality – between men and women, but also between people of different ethnic or social origins – would result in the same opportunities for everyone, in particular with regards to education, which, as the statistics part of this paper shows, is a decisive aspect in the further development of individuals with regards to life chances. Being able to pursue interests and establish a family in a socially and financially secure environment would also mean that individuals stay in better physical and mental health and, thanks to their resilience, might be more innovative and flexible when it comes to coping with crises and thinking of new ways of living.

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6. Appendix

6.1. Abstract

In spite of the fact that nowadays, a majority of Europe's most developed countries claim to further gender equality and point towards initiatives favouring a work-life-balance, a look at the current situation of women shows a different reality. Still, it is particularly women who are responsible for social reproduction, and the latter are the primary caretakers of children. Additionally, there is no doubt that for modern women, the pressure to pursue careers in the field of official labour is growing too. Finally, societal expectations of women marrying and becoming lovable mothers are still common, one might say the norm. Moreover, politics of austerity following the financial crisis of 2008 have transferred many responsibilities of the welfare state to individuals, especially women, leading to a life in constant pressure, which might have negative impacts on mental health.

The struggle of women who are confronted with the limitations and constraints of capitalism can be considered to be a major theme in Zadie Smith's works, for example in her novel *NW*, which depicts its female characters as caught in a network of social expectations, unable to escape. Theoretical reflections on the meaning of the concept of social reproduction, a core element of heterodox feminist economics, will thus be related to a literary analysis of *NW* in order to illustrate what the concept means and to better understand why women are affected by the hegemony of neoliberal ideas in so many different ways.

Finally, by using *NW* as a point of reference, this paper aims to draw attention to the fact that literature certainly is a means to discuss current social problems and might be the starting point for changing reality by imagining alternatives to our current economic and social system. However, the limits of *NW* will also be of interest here, as the novel does not present different ways of life.

6.2. Zusammenfassung

Auch wenn die Mehrheit Europas wohlhabendster Länder offiziell das Ziel verfolgt, „gender equality“ und daher Gleichheit zwischen Männern und Frauen zu schaffen sowie Menschen ein ausgeglichenes Leben zwischen Arbeit und Freizeit zu ermöglichen, ist die tatsächliche Situation von Frauen immer noch weit von diesen Zielen entfernt. Noch immer sind es in überwiegendem Maße Frauen, welche die Aufgaben der sozialen Reproduktion erfüllen, und

sie leisten die Mehrheit der Erziehungsarbeit ihrer Kinder. Darüber hinaus spüren moderne Frauen den Druck, auch im Bereich der offiziellen Arbeit erfolgreich zu sein. Ohne Zweifel beherrscht immer noch die gesellschaftliche Erwartung das Leben der Frauen, dass diese heiraten und in ihrer Mutterrolle Erfüllung finden sollen. Die Austeritätspolitik, welche auf die Wirtschaftskrise von 2008 folgte, übertrug zahlreiche Verantwortungen des Wohlfahrtsstaates auf Individuen, im Besonderen auf Frauen, was dazu führte, dass immer mehr Menschen wirtschaftlichen, beruflichen, und privaten Druck verspüren, welcher negative Auswirkungen auf ihre psychische Gesundheit hat.

Die Schwierigkeiten, die aus den Zwängen und Einschränkungen unseres kapitalistischen Lebens resultieren, sind Probleme, die insbesondere Frauen treffen, ein Zustand, den Zadie Smith in ihren Werken behandelt. Ihr Roman *NW* stellt die weiblichen Charaktere als Gefangene in einem Netzwerk gesellschaftlicher Erwartungen, welchen sie nicht entkommen können, ab. Theoretische Überlegungen zu dem Konzept sozialer Reproduktion, einem Kernelement und Bezugspunkt heterodoxer feministischer Ökonomie, werden daher in meiner Arbeit mit der Literaturanalyse von *NW* in Verbindung gebracht, wodurch gezeigt werden soll, welche unterschiedlichen Bedeutungen dieses Konzept haben kann. Außerdem kann anhand der Beispiele aus dem *close reading* von Zadie Smiths Roman erklärt werden, warum es insbesondere Frauen sind, welche auf unterschiedlichen Ebenen von der Hegemonie neoliberaler Ideen betroffen sind.

Ein weiteres wichtiges Anliegen dieser Arbeit ist es, am Beispiel Zadie Smiths *NW* zu zeigen, dass Literatur ein geeignetes Mittel ist, um soziale Probleme zu behandeln und die Aufmerksamkeit der Leserschaft auf diese zu lenken. Daher können Kunst und Literatur auch Ausgangspunkte zur Veränderung unserer gesellschaftlichen Realität sein, da diese Alternativen zu unserem gegenwärtigen ökonomischen und sozialen System imaginieren und erzählen können. Nichtsdestotrotz muss an diesem Punkt meine Aufmerksamkeit auch auf das Fehlen solcher (besseren) Alternativen in *NW* gerichtet werden.