



### Article Title

## Multiple Subjectivities and the Spectrum of Self: A Metamodern analysis of Orphan Black

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### Abstract:

*Human subjectivity from a metamodern perspective manifests in constant oscillation on the spectrum of self. This article explores the said multiple subjective positions the subject occupies on the spectrum in the Canadian TV series Orphan Black and its graphic novel adaptation. To analyse the selected text, two metamodern concepts of Simultaneity and Paradox are used in this article. In addition, transmedia storytelling is used as a theoretical foundation to help understand the manifestation of subjectivity in the form of human cloning in the selected texts. The study is qualitative in nature and uses Catherine Belsey's method of textual analysis to read the selected texts.*

**Keywords:** *metamodernism, simultaneity, paradox, subjectivity, spectrum of self.*

### Introduction:

In this research article, I explore human subjectivity in *Orphan Black*, focusing on the metamodern notions of Simultaneity and Paradox. I examine how the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the subject is uniquely manifested through human cloning, presenting a distinct portrayal of subjectivity in contemporary times. By employing textual analysis, I argue that the metamodern subject in *Orphan Black* continuously morphs and shifts, oscillating between numerous positions and expressing its multiplicity. This oscillation allows the subject to occupy infinite positions on the spectrum of self.

Additionally, I incorporate graphic novels alongside the TV series to incorporate transmedia storytelling, which aids in studying the said subjectivity. The transmedia approach, operating

on multiple levels, enriches the understanding of the subject's trajectory by providing diverse narrative perspectives and deeper engagement with the characters and themes. This multifaceted storytelling method enhances the analysis of the complex and ever-evolving nature of subjectivity in *Orphan Black*.

The objective of this research is to analyze the portrayal of human subjectivity in *Orphan Black* through the lens of metamodernism, specifically using the ideas of Simultaneity and Paradox. By integrating both the TV series and its accompanying graphic novels, this study aims to uncover how the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the subject is depicted through human cloning in the selected texts. The goal is to understand how these elements contribute to a complex and shifting spectrum of self, offering a unique perspective on contemporary subjectivity.

### **Research Questions:**

1. How does *Orphan Black* portray the dynamic and multifaceted nature of human subjectivity?
2. How does the integration of both the TV series and its graphic novels through transmedia storytelling enhance the understanding of this multifaceted nature of human subjectivity in *Orphan Black*?

### **Research Method:**

Belsey, in her essay, *Textual Analysis as a Research Method* highlights how to analyze a visual text, and it is vital to pinpoint the steps I have used to carry out this analysis. First, she says that the researcher should "let the text define the agenda for study" (p. 161), by which she means that a visual text delivers a lot of information to the audience, and one should find a balance between the information it provides and the questions it raises. Second, Belsey claims that because each reader receives information and interprets the text according to their own cultural and ideological roots, "there is no such thing as pure reading" (p. 163). Third, according to Belsey, the text lives in its distinction from us as readers (p. 166), necessitating a great deal of focus on the part of the reader or viewer. The significance Belsey places on a dialogue between the audience and the text is the fourth point from her essay that I find to be incredibly helpful in carrying out the analysis. Belsey's claim that "every specific textual analysis is made at a particular historical moment and from within a certain culture" (p. 169) is the last and fifth argument from the essay that I use in interpreting the text. The five points are used simultaneously to address the research questions.

The discussion in this article is categorized such that Simultaneity is explained in accordance with metamodernism, and examples from the selected texts are given to illustrate the point of the subject occupying more than one position at a time; once this is established, the idea of Paradox helps explain how the said positioning is self-contradictory and how this eventually

creates a trajectory for the subject to move beyond the either-or and neither-nor boundary. The article discusses the spectrum of self in terms of both-neither positioning nor, in doing so, explains how simultaneously occupying more than one subjective position is, in fact, paradoxical in nature. These boundaries are what is considered a norm or a usual practice for a self-aware and active subject, but here I try to argue that the clones from *Orphan Black* occupy multiple subjective positions at a time and are fully aware of that. **Simultaneity and Paradox:**

The clones from the selected texts occupy multiple subjective positions and are very much aware of their multiplicity and how it manifests; in fact, there are times that they can control it as well. When a subject is looked at in this way where, it can easily be said that it is self-aware and subjectively occupies numerous positions, rather keeps oscillating between them, the result of this oscillation, then, is the simultaneity that I intend to explain here. Looking at the subject from a metamodernist point of view yields an understanding that the subject keeps oscillating between opposing thought patterns, opposing feelings, and, consequently, an opposing sense of being. The theorists explain these opposing positions in terms of either-or and neither-nor positions of a pole. Simply put, one being cannot or should not be at one end of an extreme while being simultaneously at the other end. If the spectrum of self is explained like this, the defining feature is the fact that there would be two opposing poles to a spectrum, and an individual can, at one point, occupy only one. The clones in *Orphan Black* defy this as they tend to occupy not only the positions on the opposing poles but also many others on the spectrum; not only do they occupy these positions, but they are also aware of their movement between poles and otherwise.

Looking at it from a metamodernist angle, it can also be observed that they occupy all the positions mentioned above simultaneously. Therefore, the interesting thing is not the fact that the subject takes these numerous positions but the fact that they are being taken simultaneously, which makes the subject inherently very dynamic in nature. This notion is usually explained in opposition to the idea of oscillation in a way that if the subject is oscillating, it cannot be stationary enough to occupy a position simultaneously or otherwise. However, because Vermeulen and van den Akker use the analogy of a pendulum swinging between poles, I believe it is this constant movement of which simultaneity is a result. If the movement is taken out of the equation, the shift from one pole to another or from one position to another would be impossible; it is the movement that allows for the subject to not only occupy but also move beyond the poles and the occupied positions.

Simultaneity, then, is explained in terms of the existence of the subject on the spectrum in a variety of positions at a time. This inhabitation of numerous positions at a time explains the clones and how they tend to move deliberately between places of their choice. Vermeulen

and van den Akker, while discussing both the epistemology and ontology of metamodernism assert that it works on the both-neither dynamic (p. 10). This becomes significant for my argument, with reference to the concept of the spectrum of self, considering that the both-neither dynamic helps the subject occupy a place (through the swinging motion) that is at once on either extreme of the spectrum and not at either extreme of the spectrum, and yet is both. This positioning, which is neither here nor there but still at both ends (and more), is what makes the subject manifest multiply and gives it the ability not only to morph but also shift positions and, consequently, agencies. In this sense, this metaxis, or in-between-ness, is what sets a metamodern subject apart. The metaxis, in terms of Plato, is a defining characteristic of being human. Plato used the term metaxis (or metaxy) to define the state of in-between-ness that is one of the traits of human existence (Benardete 192-94). Rhodes reiterates the meaning of in-between-ness by stating that "the word "metaxy" is a Greek preposition, meaning "between." Normally, Greek philosophers use "metaxy" much as we use "between" (p.1). Plato, however, specifically used the term in reference to spirituality, characterizing it as existing somewhere between the human and the divine. Voegelin describes the Platonic use further as follows:

Existence has the structure of the In-Between, of the Platonic metaxy, and if anything is constant in the history of mankind it is the language of tension between life and death, immortality and mortality, perfection and imperfection, time, and timelessness, between order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence. (p. 119)

Linds, in 2006, further expanded the idea and defined metaxis as the condition of belonging fully and concurrently to two different autonomous realms (p. 117). This is in line with how the clones behave in *Orphan Black* since all of them have a separate identity of their own but also function as clones. They keep shifting in and out of what is required of them and perform accordingly. This continuous occupation of numerous positions with agency is the defining feature, and the metaxis or the in-betweenness or what was previously referred to as the both-neither dynamic is what enables the clones to act in the way that they do. Similarly, the notion of metaxis is looked at by Whelan (2008) in a comparable sense of in-between-ness, and they assert that "we humans are suspended on a web of polarities--the one and the many, eternity and time, freedom and fate, instinct and intellect, risk and safety, love, and hate, to name but a few" (n.p).

Vermeulen and van den Akker identify with the Platonic use of the term metaxy and further explain the movement inherent in describing the metamodern turn of cultural change. The theorists argue that the metamodern subject oscillates between modern and postmodern and takes both of their and neither of their traits simultaneously (p. 7). I, however, argue for my article from a perspective that is pertinent to understanding the nature of the subject. It is one

thing to discuss the cultural movement and the structure of feeling, but another to attempt an understanding of the subject functioning within contemporary times regarding this structure of feeling. The article attempts to do the latter with the help of the clones from *Orphan Black*.

Given below is the image from the first book in the graphic novel series, titled *Sarah*. The image shows an encounter, rather than the first and only encounter, between Sarah Manning and Elizabeth (Beth) Childs at a subway station (Manson, Fawcett, and Houser 4-5). Beth is aware of the existence of clones, and we are informed about it later, but Sarah, at this point, is entirely unaware. The women technically do not know each other, and Sarah approaches Beth only because she sees a woman in distress who is about to jump in front of a train. When they look at one another, Sarah is genuinely shocked, as is evident by her remarks, “[T][T] her hell?!” (4). In contrast, Beth registers the presence of another clone before committing suicide, which is evident from the “Oh.” (p. 5).

It can be said that Beth is behaving both as a clone and an ordinary woman in this encounter, and her reaction only works as that of a clone. Sarah, because she is unaware, is caught by actual surprise and shock and cannot believe what she is looking at. This shift for Beth from an ordinary woman to a clone and vice versa is made evident by the next panel in the graphic novel where she says, “Another one. Of course.” (p. 2) much to Sarah’s confusion.



Fig. 1

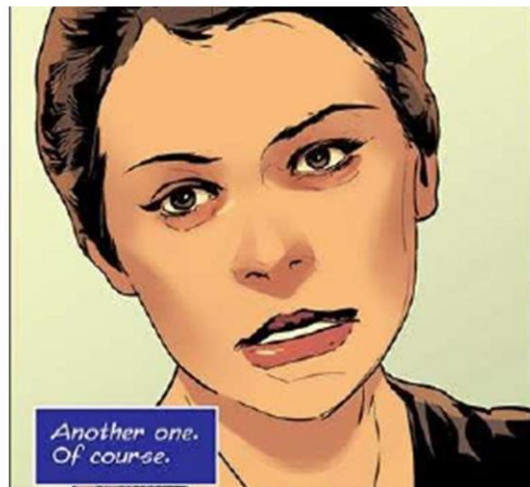


Fig. 2

The confrontation between the two clones can be looked at as a representation of multiple positions that they occupy without being aware of both the agency and the reality. The audience is also unaware of the LEDA clones and is equally shocked and intrigued. Sarah, being a streetwise criminal, sees an opportunity to get her hands on money and see her daughter, so she does what she does best and steals Beth’s purse and bank cards (p. 4). This, of course, is done to move the plot forward, as Sarah is unaware of what she is getting herself into.

Even when Sarah does not know the reality, the audience can see both women occupying a position of agency where one decides to end her life, and the other chooses to make the best out of a worse situation. This act, on Sarah’s part, pushes her into Beth’s life, and she then is

shown in a variety of scenes impersonating Beth; whether it is her sense of style or her accent, she changes everything and eventually becomes a part of the clone club (Mason 2013). This is possible because she realized in the brief encounter discussed above that the woman (Beth) looked just like her; this is evident in the panel from the first issue of the graphic novel. (Manson, Fawcett, and Houser, Sarah) below:



Fig. 3

The fact that Sarah and Beth look like has Sarah intrigued, and she confesses it to Felix, her foster brother (Manson, Fawcett, and Houser 6-7) before she enters Beth's life and tries to find answers, financial ones for her own sake, but others too when she realizes what she is caught up in. The positioning of the character is such that she has to morph in and out of her act as Beth, shifts to who she is (as Sarah), and functions as a mother and an ordinary woman in her surroundings without revealing anything about the clone club. This existence on both ends of the Sarah-Beth spectrum and inhabiting various other positions in between the two can be looked at as an example of simultaneity.

Sarah is both Sarah and Beth, and neither of them, when she is either a clone or an ordinary; this makes the said positions paradoxical as well. She shifts in and out of these molds whenever required, and the transition is relatively seamless as other people in both Sarah's and Beth's lives do not catch up to it. This is evident from the example given below, where one of Beth's neighbors does not recognize that the woman she is talking to is not Beth but Sarah, despite noticing something is amiss (p. 9).



**Fig. 4**

This encounter takes place before Sarah knows anything about the clones, but she gathers from the remark about her British accent that Beth is a local and hence, when required, shifts her accent, among other things. Once she enters Beth's apartment, it is shown in detail in the TV series how she watches videos of Beth going through her clothes, pictures, and other belongings to impersonate her to get a hold of Beth's money (Manson 2013). There are instances where she has to go to Beth's workplace, a police station, and act accordingly (Manson 2013). This simultaneous occupation of numerous positions allows the audience to see the inherent paradox and gives the subject a metamodern color.

Here, it is also essential to mention the notion of juxtaposition, which asserts the existence of a variety of positions simultaneously but acknowledges how one position can superimpose on the other and that the subject is also aware of this contradiction. Jenny Rowell argues this for *The Interrogative Mood*. She opines in her web article that in terms of structure, the juxtaposition of questions illustrates the rerouting in Metamodernism. The juxtaposition in *The Interrogative Mood* illustrates the oscillating, "both-neither" tension of metamodernism as contrasted to the "neither-nor" tension of postmodernism (n.p). This is evident from the examples discussed above. Because generally, if one were to understand the positions on the spectrum, they would deem them separate from one another, but to exist or rather exist simultaneously, it becomes extremely difficult to find a point of difference, and it would result in ambiguity where it is impossible to separate the two positions, at least with reference to their defining features. Belyk (2018) asserts that metamodernism embraces paradox and juxtaposition and builds on modernism's project of creation and postmodernism's project of

deconstruction to create its own reconstruction. Abramson, in his article on HuffPost, explains juxtaposition as one of the basic principles of metamodernism and states, “juxtaposition occurs when one thing is super-imposed atop another thing from which it would normally be deemed entirely separate” (n.p).

Another example can be observed from the third issue in the graphic novel, titled *Alison*.



**Fig. 5**

The panel illustrates another occasion of the clones being aware of their simultaneous existence, what it means to be a human or clone, and how that affects their sense of individuality. It can be seen throughout the series that the clones act both as separate individuals and as a team or variants of one individual, working as if occupying these infinite positions on a spectrum specifically meant for them as clones. In this particular encounter between Alison and Sarah, it can be seen that Alison is questioning her personhood when she says, “I am not even a real person” (Manson, Fawcett, and Houser 6) as she is aware that she is a clone and is being monitored by no one else but her own husband. This makes it hard for her, and it is in this hardship that the audience observes Sarah stepping in as another variant (and not as another person) to pacify Alison and make her see things clearly. In the panel, Alison says to Sarah, “You’re the only person I can talk to, and you’re just another version of me” (Manson, Fawcett and Houser 6).

She is acknowledging that they are variants of a genetic code, and Sarah’s response as that



variant reminds her and the audience that the clones are, in fact, both versions of one another performing individually according to their position on the spectrum and actual living breathing humans, each with their own life, family, and story. This, of course, demonstrates what I have been arguing with regard to the subject in singular (each clone individually) or subjects in plural (all of the clones together, working as versions of one individual). Thus, their simultaneous existence as both and paradoxically neither is a metamodern feature and enables the audience to see in-between-ness or experience metaxis within the realm of *Orphan Black*. The clones in *Orphan Black* exhibit the features of a metamodern subject. They are different individuals, each with their own separate identity and circumstances, but when they are treated as variants of one genetic code, all of them collectively work as a subject occupying multiple positions and, at times, situating and positioning themselves as clones other than themselves, this juxtaposition then allows the clones to exist simultaneously where they are not only occupying their own subjective position but are also borrowing traits of another. Outside of this spectrum, the clones are all looked at separately and function on different scales as well. However, within this domain, it is exceedingly difficult to separate one from another as all of them have traits that collectively make it possible for them to work towards their survival.

The clones' ability to morph into these various roles and positions is what makes them metamodern, in my perspective. Their knowledge regarding their position on the spectrum and how and when to step in and out makes for a fascinating manifestation of the both-neither dynamic. The idea of working individually, then, is challenged because in order to survive, they have to be together and work in a similar fashion as well. This allows for the clones to be looked at from a metamodern perspective of simultaneity as occupying a place which is at a time both (or more) is what makes the whole neither-both dynamic possible. This explains the said notions of either-or and neither-nor because the subject is occupying both (or more) positions and is in constant motion as well. This constant movement and being stationary enough to occupy a spot on the spectrum can also be explained through the concepts of simultaneity and paradox. The oscillation, then, makes it possible for the subject to exist in more than one position simultaneously.

The paradox, in this way, is embraced by metamodernism. The idea of how we individually behave and what we believe in is entirely in contrast to how society perceives us and what society believes in when it comes to its individuals. As individuals living in a(ny) society, we simultaneously move from individual perceptions to those that are social or cultural and vice versa. This can also be said for the fictional narrative and world of *Orphan Black*, where the clones have to move between their perceptions of being clones and being ordinary individuals (as perceived by society) or from ignorance to knowledge when it comes to the existence of human clones and the knowledge and/or proof available for it to exist. This simultaneous

existence of both perceptions is a metamodern feature and allows for a reading of the text which exhibits paradox.

What makes for an interesting argument is the ability of the said simultaneity and paradox to generate ambiguity; this ambiguity creates a narrative in *Orphan Black* that asks for the involvement of the audience on a very active level. With reference to the examples discussed above, it can be stated that within the Beth-Cosima spectrum, they both behave as their individual selves and as members of a team, or variants of one individual, and outside of their spectrum, the simultaneity can be observed with reference to existing as clones and ordinary individuals at a time. The consequence, of course, is the inherent paradox that results in ambiguity, manifested here with Emi's reaction of confusion and, previously, with Beth's neighbor when Sarah was mistaken as Beth.

The audience is actively involved not only in keeping up with the change in appearances, accents, dress sense, and how a particular clone carries themselves but also with the several major and minor storylines of the clones. The transmedia form of the narrative and how it expands both horizontally and vertically makes it difficult for a strict boundary to remain between creator, work, and audience. The audience is earnestly engaged and can see through the apparent divide between the creator, work, and themselves; multiple mediums help in establishing that connection on a deeper level, and the audience connects and reconnects with the characters and, consequently, the narrative in an effective way. It is effective in the sense that the audience gets to know the characters from all dimensions; what they cannot find in the TV series, they can fill in from the graphic novels and work through the mediums to reach a comprehensive understanding.

Not only that, but also baring their tactics to the audience, such as using one actor to play the clones (obviously) and using the same look for the graphic novels, makes it evident to the audience that it is a created world, and nothing is hidden from them. There are plenty of times that the clones are shown occupying the screen together, and it is evident that either a double is being used or the screen is technologically manipulated in post-production; either way, the audience can see all and is still willingly invested in knowing more about the subject, its journey, and how it all unfolds. The struggle of the clones to deal with their existential issues, their personhood, and their individuality, all the while nudging the narrative towards posthumanism, are some of the reasons that the sci-fi series captures the attention of the audience. The issues are very contemporary and relatable, and the genre of science fiction makes it more probable and possible. It can be said that metamodernism is the expression of a new philosophical view of existential problems, a vision that leaves its mark on how they are approached and resolved, and it symbolizes the trend that characterizes contemporary society. These narratives represent scenarios where constructive efforts to address societal problems,

rather than criticism and problematization, are crucial. These plotlines encourage proactive and anticipatory thinking, such as "how will it be in the future if..." or "what can we do to..." and promote constructive, reflective, rational, and proactive thinking (Brunton 65). These types of narratives, then, are different from the traditionally available narratives, and I think it is a metamodern feature in itself: the creation of a narrative that earnestly engages the audience. This kind of earnest engagement does not alienate the audience and makes them an equal in the meaning-making process, which is not possible in linear narratives where the role of the audience is passive or even in narratives where, using the deconstructive strategies, the author removes the trust from the narrative itself. With this kind of reading, a metamodern narrative is created, which constructs hope and gives the audience a chance to reconnect with narratives in a way that was previously denied because of the modern and postmodern techniques of narrative building. Where the modern narrative presents the work in such a way that the divide between the author, work, and audience is enhanced through the use of metanarratives, postmodern narratives blur the boundaries between the creator, work, and audience with the help of a continual ironic denial and rejection of metanarratives, metamodern narratives present a chance for the audience to reconnect with the narrative by giving up the pretense that a divide between creator, work, and audience is something that cannot be diminished; they make their role apparent and reach out to the audience, inspiring hope in the process. *Orphan Black* is an example of such a metamodern narrative, both because of its form and content. Focusing on issues of human cloning and the consequent subjectivity of the said clones, the text simultaneously allows for a fictional present dealing with these issues to exist in harmony with an actual future (or present) where human cloning is a possibility, making the audience wonder about what happens (or will happen) when one's individuality and existence is questioned or challenged in this way. This simultaneous existence is inherently paradoxical as well as technically, a text should occupy one of these positions, but because the genre is science fiction, it becomes easier for the creators to take liberties and imagine a world where all that they discuss is not only a possibility but also a speculative probability.

This kind of narrative then not only allows for a connection between the creator, work, and audience but also ensures that the audience feels this connection either through form or through content, and in my opinion, *Orphan Black* pulls the audience in on both fronts. The clones and their connection, how the texts keep referring to them as "clone club" or the clones as "sestra," the feeling it evokes is real, and the clones feel for one another, which, in turn, makes the audience explore the connection differently and one is found rooting for all the sister clones. This return of feeling for a narrative (or otherwise) in contrast to a postmodern detachment and sense of cynicism is what cultivates earnestness and gives value to lived and felt experiences. This difference between postmodern and metamodern narratives is explained by Dember

(2018) in the following words when he says that if postmodernism “shame[s] ebullient, unabashed self-expression,” then “[m]etamodernism gives us permission for [ebullient, unabashed self-expression]...not toward a randomness or anarchic or destructive impulse” but rather “to protect the solidity of felt experience against the scientific reductionism of the modernist perspective and the ironic detachment of the postmodern sensibility.” (n.p)

Vermeulen and van den Akker describe this return of feeling or return of earnestness by saying that “the cultural industry has...increasingly [abandoned] tactics such as pastiche and parataxis for strategies like myth and metaxis, melancholy for hope, and exhibitionism for engagement”

(7). They further explain their thought:

Indeed, both metamodernism and the postmodern turn to pluralism, irony, and deconstruction to counter modernist fanaticism. However, in metamodernism this pluralism and irony are utilized to counter the modern aspiration, while in postmodernism they are employed to cancel it out. Metamodern irony is intrinsically bound to desire, whereas postmodern irony is inherently tied to apathy. (p. 10)

What the theorists suggest is important as it gives importance to what the creators have chosen to turn to in metamodern times. Previously, with the modern narratives, the work was presented to the audience through the author, and as the creator, they had a god-like status, with essentially no one judging or questing the validity of the narrative, and the audience simply suspended their disbelief willingly as there was nothing that they could question. With postmodern narratives and the advent of suspicion and denial of metanarratives and the author’s agency, the audience became suspicious of the narrative itself as the creator made their role evident as a manipulator, as imperfect as anyone from the audience and consequently, the audience cannot suspend their disbelief as they do not believe in the first place. The metamodern narrative, on the other hand, makes the audience aware of the devices and techniques used by the author. The audience has all the knowledge of how the work is constructed. Yet, they can choose to suspend their disbelief to enjoy the narrative, and the creator, having borne it all, still has not shattered any illusions regarding the fact that it is, in fact, a narrative.

In the metamodern narrative, the artist and audience are both aware of the work's constructed nature but opt to partake in the experience for the purpose of doing so, making the tension between them less likely to arise; this contrasts with the modern illusion or the postmodern disclosure. In other words, the return to earnestness is not just a return to earnestness; it is also a return to emotion and feeling, a means of cultivating optimism rather than apathy; the return to earnestness reconnects where postmodernism intended to disconnect. Although metamodern work acknowledges the artificiality of these sensitivities, it still makes use of

them because they are crucial to the felt human experience. Alber and Bell reiterate the sentiment when they say,

Like their postmodernist predecessors, artists of the twenty-first century acknowledge the fundamental constructedness of ethical principles. The postmodernist reaction can be characterized as a form of escapist withdrawal from societal and global responsibilities into ironic self-reflexivity and/or playful metafictionality ...By contrast, more recent artists suggest that belief systems and convictions matter, even though – as discourses – they are inevitably constructed. (p. 125)

**Conclusion:**

In this article, the purpose was to demonstrate how the metamodern subject occupies multiple positions on the spectrum of self simultaneously and, in doing so, paradoxically exhibits metaxies or in-between-ness, explaining the neither-both dynamic inherent in such a subject. This article argues that through the oscillation and the struggle to escape their inherent and essential self, the subject enters a zone that is manifested through the metamodern notions of simultaneity and paradox; they occupy multiple positions at a time, and their movement on the spectrum creates ambiguity because of the paradoxical neither-both dynamic, considering that when they occupy one position, they cannot or should not be able to occupy another. Still, the subject in contemporary times does so, making it impossible for them to identify with either of the positions completely. This approach not only deepens the understanding of subjectivity in the selected texts but also highlights the innovative ways in which subjectivity manifests in the metamodern times and can be studied accordingly.

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