

Metamodernism: Meaning-Making by moving Beyond Postmodern Irony and Skepticism in Zain Saeed's *Little America*

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Abstract:

This research paper examines how Zain Saeed's *Little America* creates a new approach to meaning-making by moving beyond postmodern irony and skepticism through a metamodernist lens. While postmodern literature repeatedly challenges grand narratives and maintains detachment (Lyotard, 1984; Baudrillard, 1994), *Little America* demonstrates a divergent movement toward sincerity, relational complexity, and affective depth. Drawing on Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's basic definition of metamodernism, Hanzi Freinacht's politics of hope, and Alison Gibbons's work on depth-after-depthlessness, this research examines key narrative passages, oscillating between scenes of personal transgression, cultural negotiation, emotional reckoning, and institutional failure. Through these instances, Saeed's novel "Little America" illustrates techniques of metamodern such as oscillation between hope and despair, ethical ambivalence, embodied vulnerability, transparent authority, and narrative re-enchantment. In due course, *Little America* offers a forceful literary model for how contemporary fiction can reengage with meaning, self, and community amid global flux and dislocation, following a middle path between uncritical idealism and detached cynicism.

Keywords: Little America, Metamodernism, irony and skepticism, depth-after-depthlessness, oscillation

Introduction

Postmodernism, a literary movement which appeared prominently in the late 20th century, acknowledged the impossibility of celebrating fragmentation, stable meaning, irony, and skepticism toward grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984; Baudrillard, 1994). Yet, in the early 21st century, a clear cultural change has developed, one that insists on emotional depth, reclaiming sincerity, and ethical engagement in reaction to pervasive detachment. That very developing paradigm, called metamodernism, looks for oscillating between poles such as hope and doubt, irony and affection, constructivism and critique, activating a new way of navigating meaning (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010).

In his very first novel, *Little America*, Zain Saeed drafts a plot rich in personal reckoning, emotional ambivalence, institutional critique, and cultural hybridity. Set within an uneasy enclave known as Little America, the novel features characters who confront symbolic authority, utopian ideals, existential vulnerability, and personal identity. These narratives offer fruitful ground for metamodernist analysis, as they express depth beyond postmodern irony, presenting sincerity that rests rationally aware and ethically grounded.

This research work aims to explore how Zain Saeed's *Little America* transcends the cynical detachment of postmodern texts to foster new ways of engaging with meaning and reality. By analyzing seven main narrative sites, such as utopian failure and public disillusionment, religious symbolism, cultural negotiation, personal transgression, emotional collapse, embodied authorship, and institutional collapse, this research establishes how Saeed's novel models a

metamodernist ethic of sincere oscillation. Through the analysis of these passages, *Little America* appears as a paradigmatic text demonstrating how literature can guide us toward re-engaging with meaning, self-generation, and community in an age categorized by global instability, the collapse of certainties, and social fragmentation.

Literature Review

In recent years, a large number of scholarships have emerged around metamodernism as a cultural and aesthetic movement that aims to move beyond the standoffs of postmodernism. Vermeulen and van den Akker, in their influential essay, "Notes on Metamodernism," define the movement as "an informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism," and define it as a structure of feeling that oscillates between "postmodern irony" and "modern enthusiasm" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010). This oscillation assists as a basic concept in critical and analytical studies of contemporary fiction, film, and digital media, suggesting a shift from postmodern detachment and toward emotional sincerity, ontological depth, and social engagement.

Alison Gibbons further extends the theoretical framework of metamodernism into the field of narrative studies. In *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, she discusses that contemporary fiction displays "depth after depthlessness," mentioning to an affective return in the wake of postmodern flattening (Gibbons, 2015). Alison Gibbons' work is mainly important in understanding how narrative techniques such as irony, fragmentation, and self-reflexivity are reconfigured not to destabilize meaning, but to recreate it with ethical complexity. She emphasizes on stylistic sincerity, emotional immediacy, and narrative re-enchantment as hallmarks of the metamodernistic text.

While a great deal of this theoretical work originates in Western contexts, metamodernism is gradually being applied to transnational and postcolonial literature. Hanzi Freinacht, a theorist of metamodern politics, debates for the growth of "a new developmental politics" that recognizes structural inequalities and historical injustices while also accepting cultural transformation and psychological depth (Freinacht, 2017). Though his work is chiefly philosophical, it provides a conceptual bridge to literature that explores utopia, the disillusionment of modern institutions, and societal reinvention, which are central concerns in Zain Saeed's *Little America*.

Despite this theoretical proliferation, analytical and critical examination of Zain Saeed's novel remains very limited. *Little America* has not yet received constant academic consideration in peer-reviewed literature, mainly within the theoretical framework of metamodernism. Existing commentary often emphasizes on its transgressive themes and socio-political critiques, yet little has been written about its narrative tone, emotional complexity, or oscillatory aesthetics. This absence provides a very significant opportunity. By applying a metamodern lens to *Little America*, this research work positions Saeed's novel as a South Asian standard of the wider cultural shift from postmodern skepticism to sincere engagement with meaning, identity, and community.

Thus, this research work aims to contribute to a growing interdisciplinary discussion on metamodernism by positioning *Little America* within its aesthetic and ethical paradigms. The novel's themes, structure, and tone reflect the metamodern impulse to see renewed cultural and existential meaning not through uncritical optimism, but through ethically reflective sincerity.

Research Methodology

This research work employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis and theoretical application. Specifically, the study analyzes the selected passages from Zain Saeed's novel "Little America" by means of the analytical lens of metamodernism, a critical movement that emphasizes the oscillation between postmodern skepticism and modern sincerity. The research work is informed by literary theory, cultural studies, and metamodern aesthetics, drawing on the works of Vermeulen and van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Hanzi Freinacht to guide interpretation.

The principal text, "*Little America by Zain Saeed*," is analyzed and interpreted for formal, thematic, and affective features that demonstrate metamodern characteristics. These characteristics include oscillation between irony and sincerity, self-reflexivity paired with emotional depth, the presence of hopeful engagement despite evident disillusionment, and the construction of new meaning through the breakdown of postmodern detachment. The research work treats the narrative voice, character development, stylistic devices, and symbolic motifs as data facts to examine how metamodern meaning-making functions in the text. Passages are selected based on their thematic significance to key metamodern concerns such as utopia/dystopia, belief/disbelief, emotional vulnerability, moral ambiguity, and relational sincerity. These passages are not selected randomly but intentionally selected from across the novel to signify its wider narrative structure and ideological arc. Each passage is analyzed through a hermeneutic approach, taking into account the socio-cultural and philosophical contexts in which *Little America* was written and is set, namely, contemporary Pakistan, postcolonial hybridity, and globalized modernity.

Moreover, this research work implements a constructivist epistemology, which states that knowledge and meaning are not objective or fixed but are frequently constructed through discourse, affect, and cultural negotiation. This supports metamodernism's rejection of absolute binaries and its embrace of plural perspectives and provisional truths. Rather than offering absolute interpretations, this research work seeks to highlight how *Little America* stages an ongoing, spontaneous search for meaning emotionally, politically, and aesthetically. No empirical data collection was undertaken, and all analysis is based on publicly available literary and theoretical sources. The interpretive work is conducted in line with best practices in literary and cultural studies, with proper citations and critical engagement with relevant secondary literature.

Research Question

- The current research study aims to answer the following research question;
- How have new ways to engage with meaning and reality been established by moving beyond postmodern irony and skepticism?

Theoretical Foundations: From Postmodernism to Metamodernism Postmodern Irony and Skepticism

The postmodern literary form is notably defined by its doubt of master narratives, authority, and stable identity. Lyotard captures this as "incredulity toward metanarratives," while Baudrillard analyzes the landscape of "simulacra" where images substitute reality (Lyotard, 1984; Baudrillard, 1994). In practice, such narratives employ irony, detachment, metafiction, and pastiche

(Hutcheon, 1989). While such tools can expose ideology, they often leave no substantive space for emotional engagement or ethical commitment.

Emergence of Metamodernism

Metamodernism as a movement responds to postmodern irony with a renewed openness to ethical reflection, sincerity, and affect. Vermeulen and van den Akker define it as an oscillation, “a both-neither synthesis, revolving around modernist enthusiasm and postmodern irony” (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). Alison Gibbons calls it as “depth after depthlessness”, an emotional and ethical reinvestment in likelihood (Gibbons, 2015). Freinacht further explains this with a political aspect, arguing for productive hope and reformative social engagement (Freinacht, 2017). By holding postmodern criticism while declining to abandon moral and existential speculation, metamodernism opens a third way between naive idealism and detached parody.

Critiques and Contextual Relevance

Some critics like Alan Kirby advise against failing to postmodern understandings into an uncritical optimism (Kirby, 2009). Yet metamodernism struggles with this by highlighting reflexive awareness. By navigating between poles, deprived of prioritizing just one, metamodern narratives can preserve moral vision without yielding to hubris. *Little America* represents this sensibly standardized affective stance, existing at the juncture of cultural suspicion and redemptive possibility.

Analyzing *Little America* through Metamodernism

“I grew more tired of the situation by the day. We started off as free city within a city, but we had become an enterprise, a mirage, a tease. Some-those with access-were happy. But they made a very low percentage of the citizens of my beautiful city. For the rest of them-including myself-instead of an inspiration, we were becoming the cause of their resentment. Freedom and happiness was an arm's length away, but it was still too far.”(P.184)

In this very scene, characters oppose how *Little America*, a project once imagined as a utopian enclave, has failed to fulfill its promise. The narrator's longing turns to collapse. Through a metamodern lens, this tiredness is not cynical but charged with residual commitment. The recurrent phrase “at arm's length away” highlights a tragic oscillation between visibility and inaccessibility. The passage reframes institutional disappointment not as evidence of narrative collapse, but as a call to rebuild imagination ethically (Freinacht, 2017).

A memo titled “The future of *Little America*” has 4-point agenda that can be summarized as:

1. *Little America* will no longer be open to the public... but a fee of 15 millions
2. Religious wear will be banned with immediate effect. All male visitors must roll down the legs of their shalwars.
3. The mosque will be demolished and is replaced by a museum of Western artefact.
4. All current and future members will be subject to exhaustive background checks-including criminal, family, and financial history. (P190-191)

These sweeping guidelines carry irony, but in Saeed's hands, they are not postmodern satire; rather, they mirror cultural dislocation and assimilation tensions. The prohibition of religious symbols and demolition of sacred space is

emotionally painful yet logically grounded. This political crackdown is a breakdown of the pluralistic promise. *Little America* responds with metamodern empathy: feeling the loss of cultural memory while retaining a cautious hope for reconstituted belonging (Gibbons, 2015).

“Some men brought saris and kurtas and emerged from rooms as beautiful women, and sat down to chat with the rest of the people. One woman brought books on atheism that she could never keep in her house, and she read them in a corner all night long. It was never a party, or a gathering-it was simply the life of the night, a time to do whatever you pleased. I mostly sat around and laughed, and smoked, and in that I was happy, I was content. It must've been on the third or fourth week of the club that I saw Afzal kiss a man” (P.63)

In this very passage, *Little America*'s clandestine nightclub consents to liberated sexual manifestation and identity. This can not be termed as a parody of gender performativity, but an affectively rich space of becoming. The textual description treats transgression as a site of actual, embodied transformation. The sincerity of expression, even in defiance, echoes Metamodern calls for authenticity within cultural hybridity (Freinacht; Ahmed).

“What is alcohol but liquid to be passed out at a later time? I mean to say I smelled it, deeply, and sneezed, spilled some of the golden liquid, then brought the glass to my lips and tilted it upwards, a drop on my tongue and I did not die and there was no lightning, just a split-second burning in my throat and nothingness, so I tilted it all the way up and swallowed, and someone turned up the volume of the entire world and I knew where I was. I knew I was home. (P.147)

This scene depicts a taboo-laced act of drinking that is rendered not as satire but as profound re-enchantment; taste, burn, presence. Unrestrained from religious censures, the protagonist experiences a moment of existential clarity. The world seems to “sing.” Metamodern poetics re-sacralize the material, re-sensitize the subject amidst secular frictions (Taylor, 2007).

“Thank you for the pointers on the style of my prose. I do not agree entirely that I am old-fashioned. Do you read contemporary English work? Do you? Or is it in fact me who used to do it regularly? But at the end of the day this will be your book, and the sentences should show your hand at work.” (P.189)

In this metafictional conversation, Zain Saeed reflects on authorship as relational rather than authoritative. The line repels irony and nudges at authority gently: “Do you read contemporary English work?” Yet it expresses sincere collaboration. The passing of the pen becomes emblematic of metamodern co-authorship; a space for intergenerational voice and vulnerability (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010).

“How strange ambition is! The thing that I had devoted so much of my life to now finally achieved, but with a life of its own.” (P.220)

This contemplation captures the metamodernist tension between desire and estrangement. When visions materialize, they often morph into unpredictable forms. The novelist sits in awe and estrangement. Yet the contemplative tone preserves reliability, not ironic suppression. It echoes with metamodernist humbleness in the face of emergent complexity (Latour, 2005).

“I wasn't even sure if I was angry at TJ or at the failure of my utopic hope, of the desire to see everyone flourish the same. All I saw was red. I saw the end” (P.284)

An uncompromising vulnerability can be seen in the above-quoted lines. The narrator acknowledges to confusion: anger at (TJ) a friend, a boss, or a dream. They glimpse their own human limitations. While postmodernism might parody emotional outbursts, *Little America* treats them as ethically and existentially central. The self is relational, vulnerable, and mortal. This emotional rawness exemplifies metamodern depth amid collapse (Gibbons, 2015; Ahmed, 2004). Zain Saeed shows that utopian dreams can exist without unreal absolutes. Critical collapse does not overturn ethical aspiration; it conveys it to relational care. It can be finalized that metamodern hope is pragmatic hope.

Through the shared authorship scene, Saeed repositions authority as relational agency; not dogmatic, but skilled through dialogue and reflection. This supports with metamodern applications for collaborative meaning-making (Freinacht, 2017). In opposing iconoclasm and loss of space, the novel repels both nostalgic judgment and ironic criticism. It grieves for what is erased while holding potential for repair. Cultural plurality is not flattened, but deeply felt. Transgression, be it sipping a forbidden drink or cross-dressing, is not for manifestation or ironic effect. It is effective liberation, a metamodern appeal to embodied presence and moral freedom. By foregrounding suffering and catastrophe, Zain Saeed rejects emotional detachment. Instead, he holds that cognitive rupture be matched with affective honesty, permitting meaning to reconstruct in lived experience.

Zain Saeed's "Little America" joins an emergent literary movement, from Maggie Nelson to Ocean Vuong, which reframes skepticism into emotional sincerity. Its text and narrative invite further comparative studies across media and regional literatures, proposing a template for novels seeking ethical reengagement in a fractured world. Politically, it also models how global enclaves and diasporic communities might imagine belonging through reflection rather than denial.

Discussion

As defined by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010), Metamodernism is characterized by a constant "oscillation" between modernist enthusiasm and postmodern skepticism, permitting a return to sincerity, meaning, and affect without naivety. This literary framework enables us to examine subjectivity, nostalgia, and vulnerability.

This is a sincere, almost naïve captivation with the cinematic demonstration of American life. It proposes the modernist hope for progress, beauty, and excitement. The speaker is engrossed, not yet jaded. "Eyes wide at another shiny city.....the beauty of legs and faces.....the hum of busy life." (P.5) The instant shifts into postmodern irony and cultural friction. "The bastard projectionist.....probably drunk.....the infidel..." (P.5) Baba's resentment leads to ethno-religious judgment, a rejection of spectacle, and distrust of modern institutions. His reaction expresses the skepticism and tension of a spectator who is unable to reconcile the projected dream with their lived cultural values. This duality is fundamental to metamodernism: the narrative embraces the magic of cinema while remaining aware of its artificiality and cultural dislocation. The narrator occupies a liminal cultural space. He is captivated by Western aesthetics but framed within non-Western cultural traditions (as evidenced by his father's religio-cultural indignation). This proposes a cultural hybridity, a primary concern of metamodernism, where the subject exists between worlds, neither fully assimilated nor detached.

The absurd montage of media, a dancing dog, underwear pranks, juxtaposed with the incompetent projectionist, complements a layer of hyper-reality. "Weird green faces, a dancing dog.....my champion, snoozed off....." (P.5). This looks like postmodern absurdity. Still, here it doesn't fully

incline into irony. Instead, it turns out to be a foundation of joy and chaos, an oscillation between the sublime and the ridiculous, which is another key metamodernist trait. Further expressed by the author as "rapture in my mind....."(P.5), despite the low quality of the projection, the speaker experiences real emotional transcendence. This highlights a metamodern theme of genuine feeling in a mediated, imperfect world. The experience is instantaneously flawed and sublime, much like reality in the digital age. In metamodernist terms, the passage dances between connection and critique, hope and disbelief, embracing the paradoxical texture of contemporary life.

The postmodernist lens might analyze this passage as a satire of established control, conventional morality, or teenage rebellion, using irony and exaggeration to deflate authority or critique hypocrisy. But as far as metamodernism is concerned, it resists this reductionism. It doesn't stop at irony, but oscillates between irony and hope, between critique and sincerity, and between cynicism and desire.

In the following lines, the writer is not simply disdainful of the idea of school discipline or religious dogmatism; there is emotional and narrative ambivalence. There is no denying the image of "eternal notoriety" for hand-holding is entertaining and hyperbolic, but it also respects the emotional intensity of adolescent experience. It accepts the significance of youthful desire in the face of systemic repression. Meaningfully, this takes place in "one of the largest Muslim cities," (P.35), adding a cover of religious and cultural specificity that both grounds the story in postcolonial realism and complicates the moral landscape. Rather than making a postmodernistic spectacle of East-West binaries, the narrative selects a metamodern path of complex cultural sincerity. This is not a foreigner's ironic observation but an inward, emotionally engaged reflection on how young people circumnavigate limitations, not to put an end to tradition, but to reinterpret identity within it. Not only the writer's tone is playful, but also philosophical, "I wonder what you would've thought if this had happened in your time?" (P.35) This straight statement, perhaps to a parent, mentor, or elder, suggests yearning for intergenerational dialogue, not contempt. It embodies a metamodern desire to bring together history and futurity, to revisit the past not with cynicism, but with curiosity and emotional accountability. The replication of locations, particularly in the library, where kisses occur "between shelves..... on the carpet..... under desks," (P.35), highlights the physicality of experience, not as scandal, but as exemplified meaning. This alteration from symbolic to physical engagement is fundamental to metamodern aesthetics. While postmodern chronicles often disembodied characters, leaving them lost in language or simulation, metamodernism comprehends the body as a site of both resistance and meaning-making. Here, kissing is not just defiance; it is becoming. It is a claim on personal intervention in a world trying to control how love, gender, and identity should function.

Postmodernism eminently pulls apart sacred grand narratives by uncovering their flaws, co-optation by power, and historical violence. It presented religion repeatedly as a source of irony, ideological misapprehension, or cultural theatre. However, metamodernism, as put forward by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010), gives an additional emotionally resonant and morally engaged alternative: one that neither naïvely reverts to foundationalism nor stays in endless skepticism, but instead explores belief as a necessary structure of meaning-making in a complex world. The narrator in the following lines exemplifies this sensibility:

"I told them about the peace that is to be found in religion for the common man, tried to impress on them that not everyone who walked into a mosque was a jihadi."(P.121)

Instead of defending religion as dogma, the narrator advocates for its affective and existential role, highlighting a metamodernist concern with how

meaning functions rather than whether it is ultimately "true." By noting that "most people practised as a means of anti-depression", the writer classifies religion not in terms of metaphysical truth or an ethical absolutism, but as a coping mechanism, a framework of steadiness and emotional support. This influential point of view echoes contemporary psychological understandings of faith, but in the context of metamodernism, it also conveys a deeper empathic intentionality. In contrast to postmodernist doubt toward meta-narratives, this expression of religion is re-humanized, not to restate dogma but to emphasize vulnerability and collective longing. In metamodernist terms, this approach reflects the "as if" attitude, believing 'as if' meaning exists because of its emotional and ethical utility, even while recognizing its constructed nature (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). This tension between belief and detachment is not resolved but held deliberately in suspension, the defining movement of metamodernism.

The narrator also openly addresses a socio-political stereotype: that the mosque is a place of radicalism, extremism, fanaticism, and violence. Instead of confronting this with controversial or irony, the response is measured, affective, and compassionate: ".....not everyone who walked into a mosque was a jihadi..., in fact almost no one ever was....."(P.121). The line functions as silent resistance, not in the postmodernist sense of parody or subversion, but in a metamodernist method: by reestablishing emotional nuance to a flattened discourse. Where postmodernist responses might use irony to deconstruct the media's demonization of Muslims, the metamodern narrator selects earnest clarification, embedded in care and concern for the social imaginary. The mosque is not just a symbol but a venue of personal healing, as the writer stresses that religion provides "peace" and "meaning." In this way, the passage models a transformative recontextualization of religious space. It becomes a metaphor for inner anchoring and collective dignity.

The architectural metaphor: the mosque as part of the writer's "original plans" works as a literal and symbolic act of establishment. Architecture here indicates the longing to build something enduring within the cultural and emotional wreckage of a postmodern world. This image reverberates with metamodern aesthetics, which are regularly labeled as reconstructive: works that try to rebuild meaning, connection, and hope from fragments. The addition of the mosque in the liberal city plan is not only a movement of tolerance but of thoughtful cultural hybridity, mixing tradition into a future-oriented vision. This brings into line with metamodernism's both/and logic, which holds plurality without relativism. The narrator neither rejects religion nor accepts it uncritically, but positions it as part of an evolving ethical and cultural landscape.

The textual passage demonstrates metamodernism's re-enchantment of the world, predominantly through affective, personified, and culturally situated forms of belief. It rejects the cynicism that marked much of late 20th century thinking and instead regains sincerity as a radical act, mainly when addressing politically fraught disputes such as faith and identity. Instead of being a relic of the past, religion here is reframed as a place of ongoing meaning-making, not forced from above but lived from within. It is individual, common, flawed, and still dynamic. Through the metaphor of architecture, the writer puts forward that spiritual structures are essential even in secular towns, not for control, but for well-being, rationality, and community. In doing so, the narrator contributes in the metamodern development: an affective, ethically engaged, and narratively rich engagement with reality that resists irony without rejecting complexity.

The postmodern condition, marked by fragmentation (Lyotard, 1984), simulation (Baudrillard, 1994), and the breakdown of grand narratives, left in its wake a cultural landscape wary of sincerity and resilient to affect. In

difference, metamodernism, as expressed by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010), oscillates between hope and doubt, irony and sincerity, structure and flux. The following text from Zain Saeed's "Little America", in question demonstrates this metamodern alteration through its affecting intensity and its representation of meaning-in-motion which is a theatrical but sincere effort at world-making. "Men and women were rushing to and fro, straightening their hair, rehearsing their scenes of love, their lines of freedom, chugging bottles of beer to calm the nerves"(P.142). This theatrical imagery signals a key metamodernist trope, life as performative engagement, not in the postmodern sense of simulation or pastiche, but as earnest enactment. These characters are not gone astray in irony; they are dedicated to their "scenes of love" and "lines of freedom" with thoughtful, personified investment.

This mirrors the metamodern reinvention of performance: the impression that we can reside roles that are both fictional and true, constructed and authentic, because they are driven by emotive need rather than ideological certainty. Here, freedom and love are not mottos but accomplished rituals of self-making, suggesting metamodernism's affinity with existential sincerity. In the same way the next line, "It smelled divine, and I cannot explain the sound, like the very ground was singing a song of redemption, the buried labourers under our feet come to life," (P.142) goes beyond both realism and irony, suggesting what metamodern theorist Robin van den Akker calls "re-enchantment", the coming back of wonder, myth, and blessed resonance in secular or disenchanted spaces. The metaphor of the ground singing and buried labourers resurrecting appeals a collective palingenesis: an instant of social, cultural, and spiritual reawakening grounded in memory and justice. Such metaphors point to a profound metamodern longing to move forward while lingering anchored in historical consciousness, recognizing trauma without succumbing to it. The passage is an almost mythopoetic tone that suggests a post-secular metaphysics of becoming, one in which beauty, meaning, and resistance are easy to get even in late capitalist, media-saturated places. The text demonstrates metamodernism's move beyond postmodern irony by accepting hope, collective agency, and sincere intimacy in a scene that remains complex, layered, and affectively rich. The "pandemonium" within turns out to be a metaphor for creative disorder, the fertile chaos from which new ways of living, loving, and building meaning may emerge. Where postmodernism takes down reality, metamodernism seeks to get back together with full knowledge of its past fractures. The text captures that oscillatory movement between skepticism and sincerity, disillusionment and idealism, past wounds and future likelihood which are the trademarks of a truly metamodern cultural logic.

Postmodernism's handling of power and culture was often regarded with cynicism, ironic detachment, and a sense of moral relativism. In difference, metamodernism, as speculated by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010), gives emphasis to oscillation between detachment and affective investment, irony and sincerity, doubt and belief. The novel mirrors this sensibility by presenting a morally fraught reality: misrecognition, bribery, exploitation, but refusing to collapse into either cynical nihilism or moralistic idealism. Instead, it calls the reader to dwell in ethical tension and study the cultural conditions that form human behavior. The sentence, "Some were convinced that we were running a brothel..... a portal to a different life, a city within a city, so they used what they knew....."(P.154), structures the narrative tension between appearance and essence which is a fundamental thematic concern in metamodern discourse. The place named as Little America, misunderstood as illicit, is in point of fact imagined by its inhabitants as transformative, even utopian. The people living outside, however, stick to reductive stereotypes. The metamodern text analyses both the superficial judgment of the outsiders and the desperation-driven moral compromise of the

insiders. The phrase “used what they knew” states how people depend on narrative tropes to interpret unfamiliar realities. This critical self-awareness of interpretation itself is a metareflexive act, resonating with metamodernism’s suspicion of absolutism combined with a longing to understand. At the center of this passage, there is an oscillation between disillusionment and ethical longing. The speaker neither idealizes the subculture they are part of nor denounces those who judge it. Instead, there is an ontological openness, an acknowledgement that truth is not binary. Metamodernism flourishes in such ambivalence. The phrase “city within a city” exemplifies a liminal place, a metaphorical in-between where orthodox ethics are suspended, but not abandoned. The Americans, we are told, judge quickly; so do “we.” But the passage differentiates between the inspirations behind judgment: ideology vs. necessity, power vs. survival. In undertaking so, the text offers a more nuanced cultural literacy, proposing that any ethical engagement must contain an understanding of history, socioeconomic context, and affective labor. This text establishes how metamodernism permits literature to reengage with ethics and reality after the ironic detachment of postmodernism. It discloses a world rife with moral ambiguity, but does not leave the readers in a state of relativistic despair. Instead, it focuses on empathy, context, and potential transformation. The act of bribery, the misunderstanding of cultural places, and the power of rumor, all are put forward as products of wider systemic conditions, appealing to the readers to reflect not only on the failings of society but also on its possibilities for renewal. This is the metamodern promise: not irony, but reflective sincerity; not certainty, but earnest complexity; not utopia, but contingent hope.

The speaker laments the metamorphosis of a utopian dream into an image of freedom, emphasizing the emotional and ethical stakes of independence that remains perceptible yet inaccessible. This instant offers a rich textual site through which to study how contemporary literature moves beyond postmodern irony and skepticism by adopting metamodernist approaches of oscillation, reflexive idealism, and empathic sincerity.

“I grew more tired of the situation by the day. We started off as free city within a city, but we had become an enterprise, a mirage, a tease. Some-those with access-were happy. But they made a very low percentage of the citizens of my beautiful city. For the rest of them-including myself-instead of an inspiration, we were becoming the cause of their resentment. Freedom and happiness was an arm's length away, but it was still too far. Freedom and happiness was at arm's length away, but it was still too far.” (P.184)

The cynicism stated in the above-quoted passage mirrors the residue of postmodern skepticism, principally the idea that idealism inevitably degenerates into spectacle or commerce. Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the ‘simulacrum’ is worthwhile here: what started as an honest effort to create a “free city within a city” decentralizes into a mirage, a place where the symbols of freedom prosper, yet meaningful access is restricted (Baudrillard, 1994). The repetition of “freedom and happiness was at arm’s length away, but it was still too far” states the irony of visibility without attainability, an important feature of both neoliberal capitalism and late-postmodern affective detachment. However, contrasting the postmodern impulse that would settle in ironic resignation, the narrative does not turn to sarcasm or nihilistic laughter. Rather, it takes emotive fatigue, a profound exhaustion stemming from the failure of a city project once rooted in hope. This exhaustion is not cynical; rather, it is efficiently sincere, signaling the metamodern shift from postmodern skepticism to a more emotionally involved criticism of structural limitation. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker define metamodernism as a structure of feeling characterized by oscillation between postmodern detachment and modern enthusiasm (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). In this passage, the speaker

accepts the preliminary utopian dream. Instead, they remain emotionally tied to it, accepting its noble intent while confronting its current distortion. The place is no longer the redemptive force it aspired to be, but neither is it entirely devoid of potential. This is the hallmark of the metamodern attitude: keeping belief even in the face of cynicism. The speaker's fatigue is a sign of affective oscillation, a continual movement between hope for real transformation and despair at systemic inertia. The "free city" becomes an "enterprise," suggesting how ideals become commodified, yet the tone is not wholly cynical. It is unhappy, reflective, and ultimately invested in ethical accountability rather than ironic detachment.

The line "some-those with access were happy" foregrounds the speaker's consciousness of structural inequality and the co-optation of liberation by elites. But rather than abandoning the ideal altogether, the text critiques its partial implementation. This echoes metamodernist reflexive idealism: an acknowledgement that dreams of freedom must frequently negotiate the real-world complexities of class, access, and power (Freinacht, 2017; Gibbons, 2015). The speaker's tone also avoids the 'postmodern flattening' of affect. They do not treat the city's failure as a witticism or meta-narrative twist. Instead, they remain ethically concerned, invoking a form of "affective realism where feelings are not dismissed but form the core of political and ethical insight (Gibbons)." The metaphor of the utopia being 'at arm's length' but inaccessible operates on a symbolic level to explain the epistemic and emotional tension of metamodern subjectivity, one that is conscious of the failures of ideology yet declines to abandon the longing for better futures. The speaker's exhaustion is not apathy, but a deep dissatisfaction born of investment. It mirrors an emotional realism that resonates with what Sara Ahmed terms "the feminist killjoy": a figure whose discontent reveals structural injustice rather than personal failing (Ahmed, 2004). The speaker turns out to be such a figure, knowing that even progressive places can reproduce exclusion, and their continuous affective engagement proposes a metamodern approach to critical care. Instead of disappearing into irony or resignation, the speaker classifies a disjunction between lived reality and visible possibility. This understanding itself grows into a catalyst for ethical re-engagement. The metamodern subject does not give up but re-dreams, re-evaluates, and reclaims the mission of freedom through a lens that is emotionally transparent, ethically grounded, and structurally critical. This textual passage speaks clearly of an instant of metamodern rupture, where the dream of revolution encounters the obstacle of inequality, and the resulting tension makes a new engagement with meaning. Rather than falling back on paralyzing skepticism or ironic dismissal, the speaker states a poised cynicism: a condition that acknowledges failure but does not abandon the dream. Through its structural awareness, emotional sincerity, and refusal to retreat into irony, this passage establishes how contemporary literature navigates the broken promises of modernity and the dead ends of postmodernism to imagine new ways of being, belonging, and believing.

Conclusion

Zain Saeed's debut novel "*Little America*" deals with a persuasive literary model for new ways of engaging with reality, rooted in sincerity yet well-versed by intellectual critique, hope without ignorance of structural failure, and personal vulnerability in collective settings. Through metamodern oscillation, it forges a narrative path that avoids the emotional poverty of postmodern irony without swinging into naive idealism. In doing so, Zain Saeed writes a renewal of meaning through fractured psyches, contested places, and global communities. He reminds us that the effort to trust with awareness of risk is an act of imagination, courage, and ethical transformation.

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