



# Microtemporalities of Crisis: Pandemic Diaries and the Scales of Time in Zadie Smith's *Intimations*

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**Abstract:** Crises are usually seen as unforeseen and bracketed in time scale. However, the COVID-19 pandemic not only ravaged throughout the continents by claiming numerous lives, but its shockwave is still felt to this date. This paper examines how the COVID-19 pandemic was not a sudden catastrophe but a prolonged disruption that slowly unfolded violence through inequality, grief, and exhaustion. This study brings Zadie Smith's essay collection *Intimations* (2020) as a primary source, which describes life during the pandemic. This study examines both the immediate and long-term effects of the pandemic, showing how Zadie Smith's *Intimations* represents the COVID-19 pandemic as a prolonged disruption and how it links individual emotional experiences to structural inequality and social vulnerability. Using a qualitative, text-based approach, the paper applies Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence (2011) and Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of planetary history (2021). Nixon's theory proclaims the gradual effects of crises and their long-lasting impact, while Chakrabarty connects human experiences to deep planetary scales. These frameworks help understand Smith's experiences as both microtemporal and planetary. Through her description of boredom, worry, and daily struggles, Smith shows how personal experiences were affected and how they can change people's outlook permanently. The paper presents three major findings: it depicts the pandemic as a slow, consuming force that exposes the fragility of everyday life and draws attention to the environmentalism of the poor. It shows how personal experiences become planetary crises, exposing broader histories of inequality and environmental negligence; and it shows how crises gradually create injustice and force us to question existing systems. The study recommends that crises like the COVID-19 pandemic should not be viewed as isolated or completed; rather should be seen as ongoing, slow, and planetary processes. It gives a framework to understand future global disruption through everyday life.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, *Intimations*, Pandemic, Personal Experience, Planetary History, Slow Violence.

## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 significantly altered social interactions, employment, and daily living. It was a time of disruption to everyday routines. In normal times, social, economic, and environmental issues would go unnoticed, but COVID-19 helped bring them to light. Fear, boredom, anxiety, and uncertainty were common experiences. The disadvantaged had to deal with the direct consequences of inequality, like not having access to safe healthcare. Zadie Smith discusses her personal experiences during the initial months of lockdown in her essay collection *Intimations: Six Essays* (2020). The essays in the book are "Peonies," "The American Exception," "Something to Do," "Suffering Like Mel Gibson," "Screengrabs (After Berger, before the virus)," and "Postscripts" that chronicle both commonplace and uncommon experiences, demonstrating how the pandemic gradually interrupted her life. Smith also demonstrates how larger structural and planetary influences affect an individual's existence. This study examines *Intimations* through two theoretical

frameworks: Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence (2011) and Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of planetary history (2021). Together, these frameworks help to read Smith's essays by establishing connections between personal experiences and planetary processes. The main objective of this paper is to show how Smith's essays reveal the microtemporalities of crisis, small, everyday moments whose impacts are often difficult to perceive and how the pandemic disproportionately affects marginalized communities. This paper also examines how human action acts as a geophysical force that imperceptibly damages the planet, thereby creating connections between personal crises and larger ecological crises. Ultimately, it argues that personal experiences are intrinsically linked to structural oppressions and planetary processes.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Methods

This study uses qualitative textual analysis. The primary text is Zadie Smith's *Intimations* (2020). Secondary sources include theoretical frameworks on slow violence (2011) and planetary history (2021), along with related scholarly work on pandemic narratives and crisis literature. The analysis is carried out in three stages. First, it identifies microtemporalities of crisis in Smith's essays. The attention is drawn to minor yet important shifts that took place in people's lives in terms of their daily practices, emotions, and the sense of time caused by the pandemic. These changes are examined as part of a broader disruption in lived experience. Second, it applies Nixon's concept of slow violence to understand the pandemic not as a sudden event, but rather as a process by which long-standing structural inequalities and differential vulnerabilities are revealed. This can help illustrate the inequality in the distribution of suffering between different social classes. Finally, it applies the idea of planetary history by Chakrabarty that links individual experiences to wider planetary and historical contexts. This illustrates how individual actions and experiences during the pandemic are linked to broader ecological and systemic processes. Overall, this methodology relates individual experiences of the crisis to larger social and planetary systems, making visible the gradual and often hidden forms of harm within the pandemic.

### 2.2 Theoretical Framework

The research revolves around two convergent theoretical approaches: the idea of slow violence (2011) by Rob Nixon and planetary history (2021), a concept developed by Indian social theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty, which facilitates an understanding of how personal narratives written during a pandemic can clarify the microtemporalities of crisis, how the impact of crisis slowly unfolds and often goes unnoticed. They help to see the invisible inequality faced by the poor. They also show how humans act as a geophysical force and affect both society and the planet.

#### Slow Violence

The concept of slow violence was first introduced by Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). Nixon defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Unlike conventional violence, which is sudden and dramatic, such as war or natural disasters, slow violence unfolds slowly and causes harm over long periods of time. It is not a single observable event

but a process that accumulates over time, becoming noticeable only after its consequences become grave.

Nixon highlights that the act of slow violence can be invisible and thus not readily recognized as violence. Since there is no defined or immediate moment of impact, it is referred to as a “spectacle-deficient” form of violence, meaning it does not attract sustained media attention or prompt quick political action. This nonvisibility causes delays in reaction and permits ongoing suffering without proper action being taken to mitigate it.

A key part of Nixon’s argument is that slow violence primarily impacts marginalized people. This ties into the concept of “the environmentalism of the poor,” where vulnerable people are disproportionately affected by environmental destruction, toxins, global warming, and financial instability. All of these are usually gradual and hard to notice, which causes vulnerable people to be politically and morally neglected. As a result, these people are often treated as less important, and their suffering remains largely ignored. In order to deal with this invisibility, Nixon (2011) claims that slow violence needs “imagination and scientific testimony” so that such damages become visible. Literature and critical writings are therefore vital for describing and portraying such damages that are difficult to identify and quantify.

In literature, slow violence is associated with ecosickness narratives, where environmental harm and bodily suffering are shown together. These narratives explain how large social, economic, and political systems affect individual bodies, making broader environmental crises more understandable through personal experience. It is also essential to mention that literature tends to emphasize the aftermath of disaster rather than the actual incident. For instance, the novel *Animal’s People* (2007) by Indra Sinha reveals how long-term impacts of the Bhopal disaster persist throughout the years following the catastrophic event. Likewise, the narratives about the Chernobyl accident of 1986 focus on how the radioactive destruction affects people across generations.

A number of crucial mechanisms help slow violence to take effect. These include temporal and spatial disparity in the sense that not everybody suffers the same damage, and the effects follow along the lines of race and economic class inequality. The other mechanism is that of producing doubt, by which long-term suffering goes unnoticed because it leads to prolonged indecisiveness as to whether there really is any serious issue at hand. Another mechanism is that of contempt as a structural mechanism, which makes vulnerable groups suffer and thus be written off as a calculated loss. Finally, microtemporalities refer to small, everyday changes in routine, time, and emotion that build up during a crisis, showing how slow violence is experienced gradually in daily life.

With respect to *Intimations*, slow violence offers a framework to view the coronavirus disease pandemic as not an abrupt disaster but a manifestation of existing disparities. Zadie Smith (2020) shows that the pandemic exposes long-standing social problems rather than creating new ones. This supports Nixon’s (2011) argument that slow violence uncovers and intensifies already existing injustices. During the pandemic, frontline workers, racial minorities, and economically disadvantaged groups faced more difficult conditions, showing that harm is unevenly distributed. This makes clear that slow violence develops gradually and affects certain groups more than others over time.

## Planetary History

Dipesh Chakrabarty's theory of planetary history (2021) links human actions to the earth's geological and ecological systems. Chakrabarty differentiates between the "global" and the "planetary". The "global" is concerned with human systems such as politics, economy, and culture and the "planetary" refers to the earth and its processes over millions of years.

In *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), Chakrabarty says that humans have become a geophysical force. They are now capable of changing the climate and the habitability of the planet. This period is known as the Anthropocene. It calls for a rethinking of history, human responsibility, and our place on earth. Chakrabarty says, "to inhabit the planetary is to acknowledge that human history and geological history have now converged" (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 14). Planetary thinking challenges the anthropocentric worldview that separates humans from nature. Instead, it presents humanity as part of an interconnected, fragile ecosystem, where human survival depends on the Earth's ecological balance. When considering Smith's *Intimations*, such a model makes it possible to see the pandemic as both a threat to human wellbeing and as an example of species interdependence.

It is clear from Smith's essays that "death has always been with us; it is the living who forget" (Smith, 2020, p. 29), which expresses Chakrabarty's (2021) perspective on planetary existence. In *Intimations*, it becomes evident that the pandemic confronts the characters with their position in the planetary collectivist state, rejecting the notion of human domination. These two paradigms of slow violence and planetary history enable one to interpret *Intimations* as not only a memoir but also a testament to the vulnerabilities of humans.

## 3 Discussion

### 3.1 Microtemporalities of crisis

Zadie Smith's *Intimations* captures subtle changes in perception and daily life during a crisis, which can be termed as microtemporalities. Microtemporalities are the small, often unnoticed shifts in how we experience time, which build up during moments of disruption. For example, in the essay "Peonies" by Zadie Smith, she mentions how, before the pandemic, her life was highly regimented, and the days were "divided into forty-five-minute increments... packed tight and levelled of precisely" (Smith, 2020, p. 9). However, this structured view of her time changed during the pandemic, as mundane activities became sources of reflection and transformation.

The pandemic, as Smith describes in "Something to Do," reveals the temporal elasticity of everyday life. She strives to fill her days with mundane tasks, for instance, writing, arranging objects, or any activity, because these activities help her to "fill the time" (Smith, 2020, p. 18). As can be shown by these examples, crises encompass not only major events but also changes that occur through time to subtly affect human experience. The connection between creative pursuits and mundane activities is made by Smith in the following quote: "There is no great difference between novels and banana bread" (Smith, 2020, p. 21). In this recognition, there is comfort since there is a realization that she is "not the only person on this earth who has no idea what life is for, nor what is to be done with all this time aside from filling it" (Smith, 2020, p. 21).

Smith also points out that during the lockdown, "the hours stretched like taffy; the world outside my window seemed both frozen and urgent" (Smith, 2020, p. 19). In this case, it is the dissonance between the experience of time internally and the social tempo outside. When life was straight up, with nothing to distract from, or add to, or build upon, she hardly knew what to do with it. The pandemic, for her, launched a worldwide humbling amongst those has been absorbed in constant productivity to deal with "the perennial problem of artists: time, and what to do in it" (Smith, 2020, p. 19).

These instances show how crises are not limited to huge catastrophes alone, but are also determined by small temporal changes that together change the nature of human experience. Here, the micro-temporal experiences can be seen in relation to Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence in that their impact is felt through gradual change over regular activities instead of dramatic experiences. These individual experiences can also be linked to Dipesh Chakrabarty's planetary frame of reference in the sense that these individual experiences are impacted by global and ecological factors.

### **3.2 Revealing the invisible crisis**

The pandemic brought to light certain truths and aspects of history that had been concealed for quite a while behind the curtain of national legends, privileges, and personal ease. Smith notes that rather than viewing death as something universal to humanity, America has viewed death as "a series of discrete problems" (Smith, 2020, p. 15), such as wars on cancer, drugs, or poverty, treating each as an isolated issue rather than recognizing death as an absolute condition that connects them all.

However, the pandemic brought out this invisibility. Smith writes, "death was always here, albeit obscured and denied, but now everybody can see it" (Smith, 2020, p. 16). It is akin to Nixon's concept of slow violence, which states that some harms, like environmental, social, or historical damages, happen slowly during a crisis and often go unnoticed. Such violence is not perceivable until the act of imagination makes it visible. In this way, Smith's essays become an illuminative literary device, which, by imagining, remembering, and narrating, brings out the violence present in class, race, and national identity, which the pandemic amplified but did not create.

According to Smith (2020, p. 11), the act of writing itself acts as a way of exercising "control" and "resistance," whereby "largely shapeless bewilderment" becomes a structured narrative. This activity correlates closely with the theory advanced by Nixon, where slow violence is difficult to recognize due to its dispersed nature across space and time; thus, narrative becomes an important means of bringing it into visibility. Through narrating individual experiences, Smith brings to light the broader systems of oppression theorized by Nixon. As such, imaginative writing becomes a dual-purpose exercise, combining aesthetic and political engagement to make visible the hidden crises within the "American imagination."

### **3.3 Environmentalism of the poor**

According to Nixon (2011), marginalized groups suffer more from crises than any other group. The COVID-19 outbreak is one example of such a crisis. This event did not impact all people in the same way but rather exposed and magnified the existing disparities in American society, as pointed out by Smith in her book. As Smith (2020, p. 16) asserts, the idea of a "democratic" virus was "somewhat overstated." Rather, it became evident that the structures of inequality decided who would be most affected

by the virus. Evidence shows that “Black and Latino people are now dying at twice the rate of white and Asian people. More poor people are dying than rich” (Smith, 2020, p. 16). Economic privilege affects survival as well. Historically, those with money could “buy” a greater chance of delaying death, which Smith describes as “reasonable to offer the best chance of delay to the highest bidder” (2020, p. 16). This notion was made clear during the COVID-19 pandemic when governments were “bidding as if ‘on eBay’ for life-saving equipment” (Smith, 2020, p. 16), demonstrating how financial conditions may affect survival in the event of a public health crisis.

The crisis also redefined the social and economic value of labour. Workers who were previously “despised for wanting fifteen bucks an hour” suddenly became “central to our existence” (Smith, 2020, p. 16). This inequality was not just economic; it was also emotional contempt, as Smith explains, which was “less flashy than hate. More deadly” (2020, p. 16). Such contempt manifests in society’s treatment of marginalized groups, exemplified violently in George Floyd’s murder, where the officer acted with “something darker – deadlier. It was the virus, in its most lethal manifestation” (Smith, 2020, n.p.). By treating certain groups as “something less than a whole person, not quite a complete citizen” (Smith, 2020, p. 45), social systems make slow violence acceptable and ongoing, normalizing structural inequality and marginalization.

### **3.4 Planetary Crisis: Humans as a Geophysical Force**

Chakrabarty (2009) argues that in the Anthropocene, humans are no longer only historical or political actors; we have become a geophysical force. Human activity now affects planetary systems such as climate, ecosystems, and geological processes that were once considered independent of human influence. The COVID-19 pandemic makes this entanglement visible. It reveals how human-made social, economic, and political systems determine patterns of vulnerability, deciding who lives, who suffers, and who dies on a global scale.

Smith develops a similar idea through the metaphor of “contempt as a virus.” She explains that this virus spreads across institutions such as “churches and schools, adverts and movies, books and political parties, courtrooms, the prison-industrial complex and, of course, police departments” (Smith, 2020, p. 45). The roots of this “virus” lie in slavery, where the slave master “reverse-engineered an emotion—contempt—from a situation he, the patient himself, had created,” placing enslaved people in a category comparable to animals and producing “the same fear and contempt we have for animals” (Smith, 2020, p. 45). This suggests that contempt is not merely an individual emotion but a socially produced and institutionalized structure. Because contempt exists within major institutions, it shapes how people are treated on a large scale. During the pandemic, this is manifested through some people having more exposure, less protection, and higher death rates compared to others. This is not accidental but rather results from prior societal structures. In this context, contempt acts as a structural phenomenon, impacting structures of suffering and surviving among different populations like geophysical phenomena shaping the physical world.

In this way, Smith connects slavery to present-day inequality to show that the inequalities seen during the pandemic are not random, but the result of long-term structural violence built over centuries. The pandemic becomes a global crisis where biological events interact with social and political systems, leading to unequal effects

on different groups. Chakrabarty (2021) argues that in the Anthropocene, humans act as geophysical forces that shape the planet. In the same way, Smith's idea of "contempt as a virus" shows that social and historical systems spread through institutions and can have effects as large and harmful as biological forces.

### 3.5 Challenging Anthropocentric Certainty

Anthropocentrism is a worldview placing humanity at the centre of existence, necessarily presupposing that we humans can control nature, time, and even life itself. Before the pandemic, this idea was evident in living a life that is hyper-productive, technology-dependent, and highly scheduled, where the measurement of success, meaning, and identity included outputs, deadlines, and control. Smith (2020) reflects that she, like so many others, has internalized this attitude, resisting her own body's natural rhythms in the belief that mastery over time and the environment had brought purpose, safety and security.

This assumption is confronted in the pandemic, as a truth is found: humans are vulnerable, embodied, and part of planetary systems. Biological realities, sickness, recovering, or dying cannot be controlled through wealth, technology, or planning. Instead of passing through economic time, people were confronted with uncertainty, waiting, and dependence, which imposed an encounter with natural processes that modern life often tries to dominate or ignore. This shift emphasizes that human life is inseparable from planetary life, and that no individual or elite can fully escape the forces of biology, ecology, or disease.

Smith (2020, p. 43) criticizes the way elites view society, which she calls "philosopher-king-contempt". People with power acted as though they were not affected by social vulnerability, believing their wealth and influence would keep them safe. However, the pandemic proved them wrong. It shows the virus is radically democratic and involves all classes of society. This loss of human exceptionalism represents a philosophical insight, which is that humans are not rulers of the planet but rather participants in complicated planetary systems. We share this earth with animals, plants, climate, microbes, etc., consuming the same resources that influence life on earth.

By revealing the limits of control, the pandemic reorients human thinking from dominance to coexistence and acceptance. The reality is that humans need to accept their reliance on Earth's biological systems in order to survive. The focus on efficiency and dominion has caused people to forget that they are actually vulnerable.

### 3.6 Human and Planetary Timescales

This epidemic brought to light a clear-cut difference between the fast, pressing timeline of human life and the slow and steady timeline of Earth. The experiences of human beings during the time of the pandemic have been very overwhelming. As quoted by Smith (2020, p. 12), "experience has no chapter headings or paragraph breaks or ellipses in which to catch your breath... it just keeps coming at you." Days filled with loss, sickness, and uncertainty seemed never-ending and chaotic.

In the meantime, planetary time followed its indifferent and peaceful rhythm. Smith (2020, p.13) observes that the "strange and overwhelming season of death" coexisted with natural cycles, such as "the emergence of dandelions" and the "cyclic miracle of creation" seen when planting a bulb. Nature goes on irrespective of human

tragedies. The pandemic made this intersection evident. While people felt anxious and rushed because of what was going on, they were reminded of the fact that they could not manage everything, as the planet had its own rhythms to follow, and humanity was only part of this large process of temporalities.

## 4 Limitations

Limitations of this research are that the study relies on just one book, *Intimations*, which is an individual perspective. Only two theories are taken into consideration, that of slow violence and planetary history. Thus, no empirical evidence from the field of psychology or sociology is considered here. The study is completely qualitative.

## 5 Further Implications

This study suggests that future research should examine how slow, everyday experiences of crisis shape long-term social and emotional life. The relationship between individual practices and environmental concerns can be examined further by looking at other pandemic novels or climate fiction literature to grasp their vulnerability. In addition, academic research can examine other cases in which the effects of inequality, care, and resilience are evident. Last but not least, the study calls for further studies that connect literary discourse with policy-making issues.

## 6 Conclusion

This research shows how Zadie Smith's *Intimations* represents the microtemporalities of the COVID-19 crisis. It explains how everyday experiences reflect larger social, historical, and planetary crises. The study shows that crises are slow, gradual, and deeply connected across different levels. Personal experiences are linked to social inequality, historical legacies, and environmental fragility. Through Smith's perspective, the pandemic shows that human control and domination are limited. Humans are only one part of larger planetary ecosystems. Overall, this study helps readers understand how literature can reveal hidden crises. It also encourages thinking about vulnerability and planetary justice. Smith's essays offer a way to understand global disruptions by focusing on everyday life.

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