

BREXLIT AND NATIONAL FRAGMENTATION: POLITICAL CLIMATE IN ALI SMITH'S *AUTUMN*

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ABSTRACT

Ali Smith's *Autumn*, often regarded as the first Post-Brexit novel, conveys the political and cultural disorientation that followed United Kingdom's referendum to leave the European Union. This paper explores how, in a sharply divided Britain, autumn symbolizes the disintegration of national identity, the breakdown of social cohesiveness, and the emergence of political ambiguity. It also examines Smith's use of narrative fragmentation to depict the nation's fractured status, drawing on the nascent genre of BrexLit. This study makes the case that Smith portrays Brexit as a cultural catastrophe with profound effects on identity and belonging, rather than just as a political event. The novel's interweaving of art, memory, and personal relationships is read as a form of resistance to nationalist narratives and post-truth politics.

Keywords: Brexit, BrexLit, political ambiguity

INTRODUCTION

To choose whether to stay in or leave the European Union, the United Kingdom held a referendum on June 23, 2016. 51.9% of voters chose to leave, while 48.1% chose to stay, making the outcome close but clear. This choice, Brexit sparked heated political discussions and unpredictability in the economy, and cultural upheavals. Brexit was a reflection of deeper rifts in British culture, including issues of identity, globalization, and sovereignty, rather than just a policy decision.

British referendum was one of the biggest political upheavals in modern British history which caused social, economic, and cultural divisions throughout the nation. Following the vote, there was a pressing demand for narratives that could address the intricacies of this momentous occasion. Since then, a collection of modern literature that tackles the ambiguities, fears, and changes brought about by Brexit has come to be known as 'BrexLit.' Ali Smith's *Autumn*, the first fictional work in a four part series of novels can be considered as a classic in this genre. The novel, which was published just months after the referendum, offers a glimpse of a country in disarray, capturing both the short-term emotional shock of Brexit and its longer-term effects on national identity.

METHODOLOGY

Brexit was essentially a debate about the identity of the British people and the kind of nation they wish to create, not just about economics or government. The EU was portrayed by nationalist rhetoric as an outside power that threatened British independence and customs. Brexit represented a desire for many voters to reclaim cultural identity and fight against perceived challenges from multiculturalism and globalization. In areas with sizable working class populations who felt left behind by economic shifts, this nationalism was especially evident. These regions frequently saw Brexit as a chance to take back authority over their own destiny and take on the elites of the metropolis.

The novel demonstrates the odd bond between Elisabeth, a woman in her early thirties, and Daniel Gluck, a centenarian. The linear representation of temporality is distorted to show the political urgency of the time. Smith's dedication to producing a living record of modern Britain is demonstrated by the work's publication that same year. She gives readers a prism to view the chaos and division surrounding the referendum by documenting its immediate aftermath. *Autumn* is positioned as a literary work that takes place in real time because of its urgency, which sets it apart from retroactive historical novels. Here, Brexit serves as a metaphor for a more profound cultural divide, highlighting conflicts between communities, classes, and generations.

Elisabeth's attempt to renew her passport is among the most memorable scenes in the novel. The scene's ridiculousness, her face is judged to be an unsuitable match for her own photo highlights the capricious authority of governmental bureaucracy. Identity regulation and contestation in post-Brexit Britain are metaphorically represented by this event. A larger nationalist desire to establish who belongs and who doesn't is reflected in the passport renewal procedure. Following Brexit, issues of immigration and citizenship took center stage in political discussions. Smith demonstrates how the exclusionary logic of borders dehumanizes people and splits communities through Elisabeth's experience.

At the beginning of the narrative, Elisabeth Demand, a 32-year-old arts lecturer, frequently visits Daniel Gluck, a 101-year-old man residing in a care facility. Here, the narrative chronology is deliberately woven to provide a certain aesthetic spirit. The story alternates between Daniel's dying dreams and Elisabeth's memories of their early friendship, which her mother disapproved of. "And I'm supposed to ask about what it was like where the neighbour grew up what life was like when the neighbour was my age. People's lives are private,

her mother said." (Smith 44-45) This story takes place on a broad time scale, as organic as the passing of the seasons. The readers are able to continuously read because of the play with time to immerse themselves in Elisabeth's universe in the new political scenario.

"Here's something else from another time, from when Elisabeth was thirteen that she also only remembers shreds and fragments of." (77) When the mother told her that an eighty five year old man cannot be her friend and why she cannot have normal friends, she replied. "It depends on how you'd define normal, Elisabeth said. Which would be different from how I'd define normal. Since we all live in relativity and mine at the moment is not and I suspect never will be the same as yours." (78) In the present Daniel is immobile, confined to bed, his dreams bring to the surface his deepest desires, as he imagines his broken body becoming metamorphosed into a coat of green leaves. After this surrealist blending of old and new, Smith takes us back into the present which is carefully ruled by linearity and fixities.

Brexit was really a debate about the identity of the British people and was not only about economics or governance. It may be seen as a reaction to long-standing discontent as well as a trigger for new political realities. It exposed underlying conflicts over the role of the state, globalization, and class inequality. It also changed the political landscape by giving populist movements more clout and upending established party systems. By looking at Brexit from both perspectives, we may better understand how one political event can change a country's course while simultaneously highlighting underlying social problems.

The deterioration of truth and the disintegration of substantive discourse are characteristics of the Brexit era. *Autumn's* disjointed narrative style and portrayal of disconnected interactions effectively convey this problem. The political atmosphere,

where facts are twisted and communication is boiled down to catch phrases, is echoed by characters talking over one another. Because it doesn't present a single authoritative viewpoint, the novel's non-linear structure reflects the unpredictability of the times. Smith compels readers to face the ambiguity and bewilderment that define the current political environment by upending the story itself. In a similar vein, Elisabeth and Daniel Gluck's relationship serves as an example of how narrative can unite people. Their generational relationship serves as a counterbalance to the external political division, proving that interpersonal relationships can endure even during difficult times.

The narrative clings to time, or else the readers would not have been able to understand it. "He wasn't old. She was right. Nobody truly old sat with their legs crossed or hugged their knees like that. Old people couldn't do anything except sit in front rooms as if they'd been stunned by stun guns." (50) This narration is not linear; each part leaps forward, backward, and sideways to different positions. The author's abstract fantasies on the passing of time sometimes sink into a stream-of-consciousness kind of obscurity in the narrative. "But now? The old man opens his eyes to find he can't open his eyes...he's got no real way of telling. He can't move." (89)

Autumn portrays a world characterized by dread and division, but it also implies that memory and art can be used as instruments of resistance. Pauline Boty, a Pop artist from the 1960s, is included to highlight the significance of reclaiming underrepresented voices. Elisabeth's interest in Boty's artwork represents how art has the power to subvert prevailing narratives and make room for different points of view.

In this way the political climate of 2016 is essential for interpreting *Autumn*. Without engaging with its context, the deeper significance of Smith's motifs,

such as fences, passports, and bureaucratic absurdities cannot be comprehended. Thus, in addition to being a political choice, the Brexit referendum caused a cultural upheaval. Strong nationalism appeals, disinformation, and divisiveness defined the campaign. Many saw it as a return to sovereignty, while others saw it as a turn toward isolationism. The nation was left shattered as a result of this separation, and animosity and mistrust dominated public conversation.

CONCLUSION

Smith crafted a multi-layered piece that addresses both the issues of the day and universal human concerns by situating her story within a particular historical period. Thus, the novel's thematic depth and relevance as a work of modern literature are enhanced by the political context. This is a crucial literary reaction to the political turmoil caused by Brexit. Smith spoke about the fact that even if we make our own histories in a time frame, its working is not in that way. People hold their own diachronies. We carry our own past, futures and of the people who made us. We always think about the past and future in the present. In fact, the nonlinearity of time frame befits the framing of the unconventional relationship between Daniel and Elisabeth in a meticulous way. The novel illustrates the intricacies of a country facing uncertainty by examining bureaucracy, opposition, and fragmentation. *Autumn*, which is a part of the expanding body of BrexLit, asks readers to envision new kinds of connection and solidarity in addition to reflecting the fears of its time. Smith provides a vision of hope that contrasts with the polarizing language of modern politics by emphasizing the importance of art and narrative. By doing this, she exemplifies the timeless ability of literature to influence and interact with the public.

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