



# Politics and the Novel in a Post-Brexit World: Ali Smith's Autumn

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**Abstract:** *Hailed as the first great Brexit novel (Lyall, 2017), Ali Smith's Autumn (2016) has been warmly welcomed by critics as a subtle analysis of the fractured national and personal identities in contemporary Britain. By repeatedly acknowledging the wounds inflicted on the British body politic by the divisive 2016 referendum, the novel yields readily to the new subgenre. As politics in the novel inevitably provokes criticism from the other side of the political spectrum, it comes as no surprise that Autumn is read as an overtly intellectual middle class response to Brexit crisis, from those interested in the mindsets of Leavers and of the less visible Remainer segments of British society. Starting with the slipperiness of the terms "political novel" and "Brexit novel", this paper discusses the ways in which Autumn addresses the complex inscrutable present alongside ghosts from the past. It examines the novel's representation of Brexit's divisive effect, and relates it to the inherent subversiveness of the novel as a genre. Finally, the paper identifies Smith's ultimate political statement in her celebration of the transforming power of language.*

**Keywords:** *Ali Smith, Autumn, Brexit, Novel, Politics.*

## **Article History**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Autumn* is the first novel in Ali Smith's tetralogy, "Seasonal Quartet". Released in 2016, the year of the controversial Brexit referendum, the novel consciously draws on the atmosphere of despondency and resignation that dominated Remainers, who were deeply worried for Britain's future now that it was irrevocably tied to its own resources and the insular Shakespearean image of "the sceptered isle". Hailed as the first great Brexit novel (Lyall, 2017), *Autumn* has been warmly welcomed by critics as a subtle analysis of the fractured national and personal identities in contemporary Britain. By repeatedly acknowledging the wounds inflicted on the British body politic by the divisive 2016 referendum, the novel yields readily to the new subgenre. As politics in the novel is bound to provoke criticism from other sides of the political spectrum, it comes as no surprise that *Autumn* is read as an overtly intellectual middle-class response to Brexit crisis, from those interested in other less visible Remainder segments of the British society, such as the immigrants, as well as the mindset of the Leavers. The urge to classify this novel within the empty Brexit literary landscape is one of the dominant features of the critical response, as university courses on "Brexitlit" are being developed and the literary columns of reputable newspapers welcome the advent of a new genre. Although the strong political intertext of *Autumn* underlies its genre identity, Wally (2018, pp. 81-82) suggests that we should not classify it as a political novel; rather we should consider it an example of politics in a novel. Politics (Brexit) is not the thematic focus of *Autumn*, but it is the backdrop for the novel's complex web of personal relations. Starting with the slipperiness of the terms "political novel" and "Brexit novel", this paper discusses the ways in which *Autumn* addresses the complex inscrutable present alongside ghosts from the past. It examines the novel's representation of Brexit's divisive effect, and relates it to the inherent subversiveness of the novel as a genre. Finally, the paper identifies Smith's ultimate political statement in her celebration of the transforming power of language.

## 2. THE FRACTURING OF BRITAIN'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

In line with its pensive and melodious name, *Autumn* signifies the process of quiet transformation that follows the youthful exuberance of summer. Smith's novel accordingly tells the story of the week after the frantic vote and media madness, when people begin to notice the cracks in the body of the state. Young protagonist Elisabeth Demand tries to pull together the fragments of her life as she keeps vigil by the bedside of her 101-year-old lifelong friend Daniel Gluck, whose prolonged sleep embodies autumn: a link or a crack between life and death.

Metaphors and images of division and dismemberment create the background against which the story unfolds. When Elisabeth, an art history lecturer without permanent employment, tries to file an application for a new passport, she encounters an impenetrable wall of bureaucracy. The Post Office clerk informs her that her incorrectly proportioned photograph is “wrong in the head” (Smith, 2016, p. 25), and rejects her application. Elisabeth’s attempts to establish a bond with the clerk are drily rejected:

Witticism, the man says, will make not a jot of difference to the stipulations which mean you can, in the end, be issued a passport, which you will need before you are permitted to go anywhere not in this island realm. In other words. Will get you. Nowhere. (Smith, 2016, p. 23)

The image of the head, separated from the body in the photograph, invites comparison with the dismemberment of the body politic (i.e. the State) through the divisive referendum, while the clerk’s use of the poetic term “island realm” echoes Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and other literary texts that construct a notion of national identity embedded in insularity. However, as John Sutherland (2018) playfully notes, the long-cherished notion of Englishness articulated by John of Gaunt in Shakespeare’s play is inherently problematic:

That’s all very well. But the real John of Gaunt was a French-speaking Plantagenet, born in the city of Ghent. In other words, he was a Belgian. What right does he of all people have to rhapsodise about England? Perhaps Brexiteers need to look elsewhere in Shakespeare’s work for inspiration. (p. 13)

The island realm, also represented by the image of Elisabeth’s head, is to be politically and economically separated from the European Union, which implies that its inhabitants are effectively prisoners. This is especially hard for Elisabeth to accept, since her life has been moulded by the powerful influence of her much older friend Daniel, who introduced her to European art and cosmopolitan thinking. This enabled Elisabeth to transcend the limitations of her provincial upbringing, and her lack of travel opportunities.

The concept of division and separation is further reinforced through the image of enclosed common land, electrified fences and security cameras in the village where Elisabeth’s mother lives. It unmistakably conjures moments in British history when the enclosure of land anticipated turning points: the eighteenth-century exodus of the rural population to cities, which enabled Britain’s rapid industrial growth, and the notorious Highland Clearances of the same period, which resulted in the eviction and emigration of the Scottish Highlanders to make space for profitable sheep farming (Stewart). In both cases, Britain’s political and economic landscape was irrevocably changed, bringing general prosperity but also misery to ordinary people.

Although the novel is almost entirely embedded in the daunting present, references to the past are woven subtly into the narrative. They give us glimpses of Elisabeth’s childhood and Daniel’s extraordinary life, and summon moments of tension and division from Britain’s turbulent past, such as land enclosure. It is difficult to discuss a “Brexit novel” without contextualising Brexit alongside similar turning points in British history, when national identity was constructed

or reconstructed. Besides its references to historical enclosures, *Autumn* invokes another historical landmark, a Brexit before Brexit: the sixteenth-century break from Rome, which separated Britain from the Catholic Church. England became a Protestant country and other parts of today's UK followed, while Ireland remained Catholic. As historian Norman Davies (2000) explains:

The 'Break with Rome' [...] cut England off from the cultural and intellectual community to which she had belonged for nearly a thousand years; and it forced her to develop along isolated and eccentric lines. The English have had little chance but to take pride in their isolation and eccentricity. Indeed they have recruited it as a virtue. (p. 434)

Links with the Continent "were severed by a self-inflicted injury" (p. 434). Metaphoric dismemberment dominates Davies' representation of history and reinforces the links between Smith's Brexit narrative and its sixteenth-century alter ego.

The powerful impact of propaganda (such as anti-immigrant sentiments and "GO HOME" graffiti) is articulated in Smith's novel by Elisabeth's mother's anti-Brexit speeches.

I'm tired of the news. I'm tired of the way it makes things spectacular that aren't, and deals so simplistically with what's truly appalling. I'm tired of the vitriol. [...] I'm tired of the violence there is and I'm tired of the violence that's on its way [...] I'm tired of having to wonder whether they did it out of stupidity or did it on purpose. (Smith, 2016, pp. 56-57)

Similarly, Davies (2000) points out that "systematic state propaganda" created "an enduring English myth" (p. 426) of Tudor achievements. He maps the myth in its various manifestations: "The myth was set running by Thomas Cromwell [...], clothed in golden words by William Shakespeare, reinforced by the Protestant Establishment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and set in stone by the dominant 'Whig Interpretation' of history" (p. 426). In both Smith's and Davies' examples the purpose of propaganda is to construct a particular national identity. In the former, it is based on twenty-first-century ideas of self-sufficiency in the face of "harmful" EU regulations and uncontrolled immigration, while in the latter it revolves around the sixteenth-century myth-ridden concept of an ancient yet modern<sup>i</sup> English Protestant state, which naturally progressed to become a great parliamentary democracy.

While Smith does not directly implicate the sixteenth century, she does identify the Thatcher era as a time that triggered a lack of empathy for immigrants and discouraged integration. Through a spokesperson on the radio we learn that self-policing and selfishness are considered virtues in place of empathy, and the notion of society is proclaimed untenable. To complete the dialogue, a second spokesperson retorts: "Get over it. Grow up. Your time's over. Democracy" (p. 112). The full potential of Smith's irony lies in the fact that the outcome of the Brexit referendum is democracy at work, which, nevertheless, has left a significant number of people in Britain silenced as they are forced to watch their lives irrevocably change. As I reread Smith's novel during the coronavirus pandemic I could not ignore the ironic shift in Conservative ideology when Prime

Minister Boris Johnson addressed the nation from self-isolation in March 2020. Johnson thanked the NHS staff for their tremendous efforts to fight the virus, and admitted, somewhat prophetically, that there was such a thing as society after all. In doing so he openly challenged the doctrine of his party predecessor Margaret Thatcher, by acknowledging that solidarity and genuine care for the well-being of communities might save Britain in the present global crisis, and renew the faith of its citizens in the shared values that bind them, irrespective of their differences.

Given the urgency of the political matters in Smith's novel and the newness of Brexilit as a subgenre, it is not surprising that *Autumn* has been criticised by those who expected more Brexit and politics and less literature in Smith's writing<sup>ii</sup>. One such reading resents that Smith "chose to represent the views of a white, British-born, middle-class liberal whose predictable views on Brexit are already vastly overrepresented in the media" (Bradley, 2017). The author of this review indicates that those most affected by the EU referendum, such as British Muslims, migrants, and those whose views do not reflect a simple binary opposition, have only a marginal presence in the novel. *Autumn* is found to lack genuine political conflict; the dominant political attitude is that of disappointment and resignation from characters who will not suffer the consequences of the referendum, because they are protected in their middle-class niche. Elisabeth's economically independent mother is thinking of buying property "up there" (probably in Scotland) because she is not leaving the EU, and she has saved the opening of the Scottish Parliament on TV so she can savour its every word ("Wisdom. Justice. Compassion. Integrity." [Smith, 2016, p. 197]) with her girlfriend. Although the devolution in 1999 and the referendum for Scottish independence in 2014 raised tensions in England over the potential break-up of the UK (intensified by Scotland's overwhelming Remain vote in 2016), Smith's novel transcends reductive national identities and loyalties: Elisabeth's mother, as well as Smith, embrace Britishness as an unproblematic label in order to explore the complexities of personal relationships. *Autumn's* anti-Brexit stance does not enforce an explicit political attitude. Rather it is embodied in Elisabeth's deep friendship with her friend Daniel Gluck, a German Jew whose life refuses to be confined by national borders. This friendship reaffirms the bond between Britain and Europe, of which more will be said in the following section.

### 3. REAFFIRMING THE POWER OF THE NOVEL

The previous section discussed *Autumn's* representation of Brexit's disruptive effects. It explored a critical response that found the novel unwilling to explore political views divergent from those of its author, and considered it to have more in common with a monologue or a Guardian column (Bradely, 2017). This idea is particularly important because it draws attention to the inherent contradictions of the democracy of the novel genre, which gives writers freedom of choice, and

readers freedom of expectation and interpretation. Rebellious and subversive from its inception in the early eighteenth century, the novel has both instilled and undermined dominant ideologies. This partially explains the politically motivated criticism of Smith's *Autumn*. In this section, I will discuss the ways in which *Autumn* reaffirms these premises of the genre, and invokes the power of the novel as its final political statement.

In his brilliant analysis of the nature of the novel, Terry Eagleton (2005) mentions its indebtedness to other literary and non-literary forms, which makes it a "mongrel among literary thoroughbreds" (p. 1). Smith's *Autumn* confirms this, being part-realistic narrative, part-modernist stream of consciousness and contemplation of art, and part-postmodernist collage of narrative techniques and nostalgic invocation of the past, while the mood of post-postmodernist renewed faith in truth and ethical consciousness eventually triumphs over political despair. Eagleton (2005) explains that the novel is a form particularly associated with the middle class, "partly because the ideology of that class centres on a dream of total freedom from restraint" (p. 2). This is exemplified in the canonical status of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, whose unliterary narrative draws strength from its absence of economic and political barriers and the triumph of Crusoe's re-inscription of middle-class civilisation on a desert island. Middle-class ideology of liberalism and laissez-faire capitalism, however, go hand in hand with Crusoe's being a slave-trader who genuinely believes in the "white man's burden" doctrine. These factors have not diminished the popularity of Defoe's novel; rather its contradictions have created a cultural space within which we can continually reread it in manifold contexts. When explaining the novel's diversity and its scepticism of authority, Eagleton (2005) warns us not to take these terms literally, as "not all diversity is radical, or all authority oppressive" (p. 6). Another novel whose reception is inseparable from its socio-political context is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The lack of visible markers to denote the novel's turbulent historical context (the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and their impact on Britain) forces the reader to adopt Austen's keen observations, and look for signs of revolution not in events and statements, but in subtle changes of mind and heart and moments of self-realisation. Austen endorses the Tory belief in the moral superiority of tradition, and portrays the upper class (including Mr Darcy) as the custodians of this tradition and national culture in the face of the violent social changes incurred by the French Revolution (Irvine, 2005, p. 61). She is, however, deeply aware of the inevitability of social and political change, and accordingly represents marriage across class barriers (between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy) as an ideological compromise, necessary to ensure that Britain stems the revolutionary threat (Irvine, 2005, p. 57). Nevertheless, Austen does not "hold up romantic love as a value transcending all social convention" (Kelly, 1989, p.117), as it is carefully integrated within the social order. The change takes place within the individual self, subtly regenerating society from within while preserving its hierarchies and institutions (Kelly, 1989, p. 117). As Eagleton remarks, the novel is a self-authorising genre (2005, p. 7), so no fixed notions of diversity, (political)

radicalism and the oppressiveness of authority should mould our reading. Another defining feature, as the name suggests, is that novels address “whatever’s new to us in the contemporary” (Smith, 2017, p. 42), even when they are about the past. Austen offers us a unique insight into early nineteenth-century England, shaped by its fear of revolution; Defoe explores the early eighteenth-century concept of the self-confident homo-economicus and slave-trader; and Smith’s novel resonates with the contemporary political fragmentation of Britain along lines drawn by the Brexit referendum. In an article based on her 2017 talk at Goldsmiths University of London, Smith defines the contemporary as the age of Trump, and contextualises the novel (i.e. fiction) in a world in which truth is redundant. She claims that “in an age in which living by fiction means having powerful fictions politically, nationally, internationally foisted upon us, fiction lets us read and understand such fictions” (p. 43). Contrasting lies with fiction, she states that the former subvert truth, while the latter helps us “get to truth, maybe truth that’s difficult to articulate, and for which reason has had to take another shape” (Smith, 2017, p. 43). The novel is, therefore, a mode of knowing and understanding in a world constantly changing and contesting its own narratives. Smith’s preoccupation with truth echoes the politically charged notion of “post-truth”, which Oxford Dictionaries announced as its 2016 word of the year, thereby endorsing the arrival of a new cultural paradigm – post-postmodernism. The prefix “post” affirms an indebtedness to postmodernist doubt, while “truth” remains an elusive but necessary part of our existence (Gibbons, 2018).

Although the cracks in the post-Brexit body politic widen in *Autumn’s* narrative, Smith’s most passionate political gesture in the novel is to reaffirm the act of reading and writing – another salient feature of the genre. The novel opens with Daniel’s dream of waking up on a beach. The 101-year-old is confined to his bed in an assisted care facility, decomposing like the grains of sand in his dream. We can feel it sifting through his fingers and filling his mouth before the feeling of sandiness gives way to the shock of being surrounded by dead bodies, next to which the living sunbathe in ignorance. Daniel overpowers death by madly pursuing the thought of sand in the way John Donne pursues his thought of tears in “Valediction: Of Weeping”<sup>iii</sup>: he plays with words to feel their scent and touch, and to stretch the boundaries of his literary conceit to their limits. The dream becomes a threshold between life and death, as Daniel wonders: “Can you be hungry *and* dead?” (Smith, 2016, p. 6)

Daniel transforms ordinariness to extraordinariness throughout Elisabeth’s childhood. He teaches her to touch and imagine colours by describing to her the art of Pauline Boty, forgotten British Pop artist from the 1960s, and his great unrequited love. Elisabeth too becomes a teacher (a lecturer in art history), and writes her dissertation on Boty’s unacknowledged work, much to her supervisor’s disapproval. Rather than pillaging the past or pursuing what Frederick Jameson sees as a meaningless postmodern pastiche of bygone times and styles, the narrative strand on Boty renews the bond of past and present in a world falling apart. Elisabeth’s exploration of the 1960s London art scene helps

her find her vocation as a teacher and as an interpreter of the past; it gives shape to her childhood memories of Daniel's wondrous stories, as the images and colours he summoned for her now become recognisable in Pauline Boty's work. Elisabeth's decision to look after her lifelong teacher and friend in turn brings her back to her mother, whom she can now see without her former intellectual contempt. The novel thus enacts diverse ways of reading, which is one of Daniel's early lessons: "Always be reading something, he said. Even when we're not physically reading. How else will we read the world? Think of it as a constant" (Smith, 2016, p. 68).

Because the political context of Smith's novel is steeped in notions and images of fragmentation, it is natural that "only a re-affected, empathic language may heed the broken, inflected language of a political body that has for so long been alienated" (Bernard, 2019, p. 11). In line with the precepts of the emerging cultural paradigm of post-postmodernism, Smith insists on "our essential relationality – our connectedness as humans to one another in the globalizing world and with fictional characters as representations of our selves" (Gibbons, 2018). The language of empathy connects the characters in *Autumn*, and interlaces their narratives in a celebration of life as a form of incessant and avid reading of each other. The novel's final question embodies this, as Daniel asks upon miraculously awakening, "What you reading?" (Smith, 2016, p. 258)

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Smith's *Autumn* is deeply entrenched in the fragmentation of Britain's political landscape after the EU referendum, but it transcends the Brexit reality to explore the autumnal interplay of life and death through Elisabeth and Daniel's friendship. Smith upholds the power of language and empathy as a way of healing the contemporary world's manifold divides. Accordingly, Elisabeth's writing and teaching about Pauline Boty is a political gesture: as she inscribes the names of the forgotten women of British Pop art, Elisabeth simultaneously re-establishes her bond with her mother, and acknowledges that she never invested any real effort in getting to know her.

The novel's themes of disruption and healing are echoed in the author's use of diverse discourses and styles. This is beautifully exemplified when Elisabeth problematises the gap between languages of dissertation and languages of passionate spontaneous thinking. The content and form of *Autumn* reflect and determine one another in pursuit of new ways in which to manage the contemporary. Many things are uncertain in this post-millennial world, but the survival of the novel as a genre is not one of them. It remains to be seen, however, how the novel will evolve and adapt to the vagaries of the post-Brexit reality.



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<sup>i</sup> The Tudors took great pride in tracing their ancestry to King Arthur, while historian Geoffrey Elton introduced the myth that Henry VIII's rule was the beginning of modern English government (Davies, 2000, p. 442).

<sup>ii</sup> Commenting after his novel *Middle England* was not longlisted for the inaugural Orwell Prize for political fiction in 2019, Jonathan Coe said: "My response would be that sometimes there is a time to speak loud and clear," [...]. "And anyway, as my character Doug Anderton says in *The Rotters' Club*: 'Subtlety is the English disease.' I think it's a peculiarly English thing, this recoiling from a novel whose political message seems too overt" (Lynskey, 2019).

<sup>iii</sup> Let me pour forth

My tears before thy face, whilst I stay here,  
For thy face coins them, and thy stamp they bear,  
And by this mintage they are something worth,  
    For thus they be  
    Pregnant of thee;  
Fruits of much grief they are, emblems of more,  
When a tear falls, that thou falls which it bore,  
So thou and I are nothing then, when on a diverse shore.