

REVISITING THE WORLD ORDER AND BRITISH SOCIETY IN ALI SMITH'S *AUTUMN*¹

ALI SMITH'İN *AUTUMN* ROMANINDA DÜNYA DÜZENİNİN VE İNGİLİZ TOPLUMUNUN TEKRAR DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

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Abstract

Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) starts with the following lines, "It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature" (3). These sentences are reminiscent of the very first words that open Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859); "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" (Ch. I, 1). While Ali Smith's novel is a post-Brexit novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, on the other hand, depicts the events that lead to the French Revolution and its stunning consequences. Since Brexit, France and England have not seemed to emerge as allies, a situation which establishes a parallel connection between the two novels in the sense that Dickens's novel similarly echoes the turmoil and strife between England and France after the French Revolution in terms of remounting the tension politically. Ali Smith by drawing parallelism between two eras and political discourses, in her novel *Autumn*, pursues the long term lasting relations between the two countries. In this paper, spirit of the past in relation to political testimony through two main characters': Elisabeth and Daniel's relationships, the dichotomy between the young and the old, and England's relation to the European Union that are closely tied to the political issues of the era will be scrutinized in Smith's *Autumn*.

Keywords: Ali Smith, *Autumn*, Post-Brexit Novel, Intertextuality, *A Tale of Two Cities*

Öz

Ali Smith'in *Autumn* (2016) adlı romanı "Zamanların en kötüsü idi, zamanların en kötüsü idi. Tekrar. Hep böyledir. Darmadağın olurlar, hep olurlar ve her zaman olacaklar, doğalarında var" (3) sözleri ile açılır. Bu cümleler, Charles Dickens'ın *A Tale of Two Cities* kitabının ilk cümlesini anımsatır: "Zamanların en iyisiydi, zamanların en kötüsüydü" (1). Ali Smith'in romanı Brexit sonrası bir roman iken, *A Tale of Two Cities* ülkeyi Fransız Devrimi'ne götüren olayları ve çarpıcı sonuçlarını anlatır. Brexit'ten bu yana Fransa ve İngiltere müttefik olarak görünmezler. Charles Dickens'ın romanının da benzer şekilde Fransız Devrimi'nden sonra İngiltere ve Fransa arasındaki kargaşa ve çekişmeyi yansıttığı düşünüldüğünde, bu durum iki roman arasında tansiyonun politik olarak tekrar yükselmesi açısından paralel bir bağlantı olduğunu ortaya koyar. Bu önemli metinlerarası bağlantı, Smith'in uzun yıllardır iki ülke arasında süregelen ilişkiler düzleminde politik bir söylem oluşturmasını sağlar. Bu makalede, geçmişin izleri, Elisabeth ve Daniel'in ilişkileri üzerinden genç ve yaşlı, yeni ve eski ve İngiltere'nin Avrupa Birliği ile olan ilişkileri üzerinden oluşturulan politik bağlam çerçevesinde incelenecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Ali Smith, *Autumn*, Brexit Sonrası Roman, Metinlerarasılık, *A Tale of Two Cities*

¹ This paper is the revised version of the "Revisiting the World Order and British Society in Ali Smith's *Autumn*" paper presented in the *International Modernism and Postmodernism Studies Conference 2022*.

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The first novel of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Cycle, Autumn* (2016) presents the post-Brexit atmosphere through flashbacks to Elisabeth's childhood in relation to seasons, which are the representatives of the unrest and disturbance felt both politically and socially in England. Smith's *Autumn* starts with the following words, "It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature" (3). The opening words of the novel delineate the turmoil after the EU referendum (June 2016) which "was rooted in a populist nationalism that was readily attractive to many of the population" (Sutherland 311). England's decision to leave the EU falls to the very same year in which millions of Syrian refugees crossed to other countries in need of asylum. As Soros argued, "The European migration crisis and the Brexit debate fed on each other. The 'Leave' campaign exploited the deteriorating refugee situation" (np). The decision to exit from the EU, due to the intolerance to foreigners' violating British cultural values as stated by separatists (Scuire 114), left Europe prone to the problems of migration and economic crisis. Thus, Smith wrote her novel at a moment of this crisis which is very much apt for the autumn season that echoes the pessimistic atmosphere and conflict among the British.

Ali Smith establishes a connection between *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Autumn* in the sense that Dickens's novel similarly echoes the turmoil and strife between England and France after the French Revolution in terms of remounting the tension politically. While Dickens establishes doubleness through his tale, first through the title and then the beginning, characters and settings as well as the history between the 18th and 19th centuries, divides his novel into three books. *Autumn* also includes three parts representing the past, present and uncertain future. Within these parts, *Autumn* has subparts starting with a sentence written in bold with references mostly to time. All the time references alongside with the era differences between the French Revolution and Brexit allude to the connection of those that resemble the very same turmoil that has been felt after Brexit and it is reflected in the imprisoned flow of the protagonist Elisabeth's mind as will be discussed below.

Despite the fact that the French Revolution had a liberating side and power on all the Europeans, it had also been the source of much unrest for politicians. On the other hand, Brexit, which is a very personal business of England in the name of raising the national identity and integrity of the country, rather results in discrimination, otherness and alienation. Ali Smith's *Seasonal Cycle* obviously corresponds to the phases of the four stages of a human being's experience as well as a country's. The cycle starts with the autumn, in other words, the fall, which is in accordance with falling away slowly as indicated by the author in the beginning of the novel; it is also just beginning of the fall/falling away. Although Smith's novel does not open with a promising beginning due to the references to washed up bodies of the refugees seen on the shore, the first part of Dickens' novel is entitled "Recalled to Life" that gives the sense of hope.

In order to trace the relation between the two novels, we must consider the political

and social consequences of the French Revolution for England. Smith uses the voice of the past in her work to re-establish a connection with England's history as well as her protagonist Elisabeth's personal history. Her personal history is linked to Daniel's in order to connect herself to the past memory from the earliest moments she recalls to the present, serving as a bridge between the past and the present, old and the young and the old political system.

The French Revolution was the watershed in world history, which reformed the political system of France. After the revolution, all French institutions were re-established, and the revolution's social outcomes strengthened the political disposition which segregated the country into two; those who considered the revolution as the outset of "a new and better life" and others who thought it as both inadmissible and abstruse (Hampson 239). On the other hand, the consolidation against all that was deemed as a consequential threat to the social order was a crucial historical outcome of this in England. As Hampson states, that is principally why "the pace of social and economic change and the social pressures that it generated, was so much slower in France than in England" (239). That is, while France was "so extraordinarily volatile", England abided "so stable" (239). While the revolution gave rise to the formation of "a schizophrenic society with a divided perception of itself and a disruptive past" in France, "in times of crisis the British take comfort from the reassurance of their history" (242). Hence, as in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, France remains "the prisoner of its indigestible revolution" (242). However, reassurance of the past is totally ignored during Brexit in England. As understood from the quote above, the parallelism drawn between the turmoil after the French Revolution and Brexit, in fact, was not equal because "England had achieved national unity and won certain basic civil rights" after the French Revolution but Brexit, rather than creating national unity and integrity resulted in conflict and disturbance among people (Bernstein 147). The revolution not only had a strong influence in 18th century England, but it continued to have an impact on British society in the 19th century, stimulating public disputes about the necessity of political reforms and the role of the government. While the French Revolution meant freedom and change in the course of reform in personal and political rights of the people of England and while a great number of emigrants had been accepted to England from France in the late 18th century (Philip and Reboul 1), with the decision of leaving the EU: Brexit, in 2016, England turned her back on France and the whole of Europe by spurning the spirit of revolution. Many Syrian refugees were rejected, and it was opposed to the spirit of liberation which was first lit by the French Revolution. The EU, by British politicians, was seen as a corrupt agent threatening British national identity. Thus, *Autumn* criticizes the point that what is stressed in the past cannot be transferred to the present and future.

A Tale of Two Cities starts with the chapter, "Recalled to Life" in the first book. The physician Dr. Manette, who spent eighteen years as a prisoner in Bastille before to the French Revolution, is brought back to life by his daughter Lucie Manette. Similarly,

Elisabeth also desires to bring his 101-year-old friend Daniel Gluck back from the coma. Elisabeth reads books to him in the hospital. The German word Gluck means luck, happiness and as I will later discuss in the paper Daniel is evocative of the Union and the past that Elisabeth associates with good, old, happy days.

The book Elisabeth reads to Daniel is *A Tale of Two Cities* but there are also other intertextual references to “The Tempest” (1611), “Macbeth” (1606) by Shakespeare, “To Autumn” (1820) by John Keats and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) that “bring different generations together” (Franssen np). And through these references, England’s refusal to accept immigrants and decision to exit the EU resulting in a crisis all over Europe and its connection to the political, social and economic crisis experienced in both England and Europe is given. The novel’s obvious link to *A Tale of Two Cities* is strengthened by the title *Autumn* which is reminiscent of the poem “To Autumn”. Because like Dickens, Keats always preferred the individual to the collective and certainly Keats did loathe all forms of despotic authority; there is no doubt that in plain prose he was “on the Liberal side of the question as he wrote no more than two days after writing “To Autumn,” announcing his decision to support himself as a political journalist” (Fry 214).

In consistence with all these political references, Ali Smith creates his character: an old German songwriter Daniel Gluck to represent the past and Europe. He plays the role of a surrogate father for Elisabeth; an intimate but not a love relationship between them prevails throughout the novel. Since her childhood, Elisabeth has been intimated with him and thus cannot leave him on his deathbed. The intimacy between them is a reminiscent of the father-daughter relationship. Elisabeth stands for the present, in which she feels herself misfit, and her relation to him establishes a bridge between her own past and England’s to reshape it. Both England and also Elisabeth have a lot in common with the past. Daniel is evocative of the Union; accordingly, stands for Elisabeth’s integral attachment to the past. The relationship between Daniel and Elisabeth is also reminiscent of Dr. Manet and his daughter Lucie Manet. Her affection, her heart and inspiration bring her father back to life after 18 years of imprisonment. She becomes his connection to the whole world. Elisabeth also wants to create a history out of their relationship but, because of England’s policy and the differences in ages, this does not seem to be possible.

According to the political discourse of the novel, England has to take responsibility of the new order to reshape it. Because by isolating herself from the problems of Europe, England cannot be the centre of full freedom, yet it would be a synonym with hypocrisy which had been a keyword in the time of Dickens. England benefited from the effects of the French Revolution but now in the 21st century, England leaves France and the other members of the Union alone. Elisabeth remembering her own past with Daniel delves into the depths of nostalgia through the connection of the past. Nostalgia etymologically derives from the Greek terms, “algos” (meaning “pain, grief, distress”), “nostos” (meaning “homecoming”), neomai (meaning “to reach some place, escape, return, get home”), and “PIE *nes” (meaning “to return safely home”) and it also “cognates with ... German

genesen ‘to recover,’ Gothic ganisan ‘to heal,’ Old English genesen ‘to recover’” (Harper, “Etymology of Nostalgia”). Thus, Elisabeth, while revisiting the past wants to heal Daniel as well. Elisabeth connects herself to her own and her country’s pasts by mentioning specific dates in her description of her life, such as “It is just over a week since the vote” (44), “It was a typically warm Monday in late September 2015” (50). Thus, *Autumn* is not only a way communicating the readers on Brexit and its fierce consequences on both national and individual identity of the English but also a means of establishing a new connection between the old and the new through the criticism of the British Government. Since Brexit in the name of the national identity of English, individual identity is shattered into pieces through a lack of unity in self and the very essence of being a human being. Being indifferent to the world’s problems is not a step in constituting the integrity in neither one’s nor nation’s identity. This attitude of Britain is criticized in the words of Daniel who in his sleep, dreams refugees’ washed-up bod[ies] on the shore:

It is a dead person. Just along from this dead person, there is another dead person. Beyond it, another, and another. He looks along the shore at the dark line of the tide-dumped dead. Some of the bodies are of very small children. He crouches down near a swollen man who has a child, just a baby really, still zipped inside his jacket, its mouth open, dripping sea, its head resting dead on the bloated man’s chest. Further up the beach there are more people. These people are human, like the ones on the shore, but these are alive. They’re under parasols. They are holidaying up the shore from the dead. ... Daniel Gluck looks from the death to the life, then back to the death again. The world’s sadness (Smith 16).

On the shore, we witness the border between life and death. People on holiday are very much alienated from the surrounding environment. Similarly, Elisabeth’s relation with her mother Wendy also represents a lack of integration with her motherland. Wendy is portrayed as the spokesperson of the British Government criticizing the EU and she constantly judges the intimacy between Elisabeth and Daniel:

I don’t have a father fixation, Elisabeth said. And Daniel’s not gay. He’s European. Call him Mr. Gluck, her mother said. And how do you know he is not gay? And if that’s true and he is not gay, then what does he want with you? Or if he is, Elisabeth said, then he is not just gay. He’s not just one thing or another. Nobody is. Not even you” (Smith 34).

Wendy does not approve the intimacy between Daniel and her daughter and tells her that she should “have normal friends” (Smith 60), however Elisabeth questions the definition of normality: “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” (60-61). While “Dickens . . . weakens the connection between the problems of the characters’ lives and the events of the French Revolution” (Mitchells 24), Ali Smith puts the emphasis upon the link between the personal problems of the characters and the echoes of Brexit. Most of the characters of Dickens in his novels need surrogate families. Elisabeth also has a surrogate father

Daniel, but she rejects the idea of fixation on a father figure. The feeling of not belonging to her roots, the uncertainty, and the conflict in her past could all be connected to the absence of her father. This could be the reason why she tries to create a new and fresh past through her relationship with Daniel. Her effort to establish a connection with Wendy who could be a reminiscent of her link to the motherland also fails. Thus, Elisabeth through her relationship with Daniel attempts to create a story that belongs to them to make up the world: "And whoever makes up the story makes up the world... So always try to welcome people into the home of your story" (Smith 88), Daniel says. However, it is hard to create an integrated self while the government's policy forces each citizen to certain standardization. During Elisabeth's application at the post office for the renewal of her passport, the man who checks her documents exclaims: "The correct size for a face in the photograph submitted, is between 29 millimetres and 34 millimetres. Yours falls short by 5 millimetres" (24). She cannot understand why she has to fit her face into a certain standard. She is tried to be standardized by the rules of the policy, and she is also criticized because of her name: "That's not the normal way of spelling it, the man says. The normal way of spelling it is with a z. As far as I'm aware" (22). According to his perspective, Elisabeth is spelled with z, and that is why she is criticized for not having a typical English name. It sounds unusual to the officer since Elisabeth is the French, German, Dutch, and Greek form of Elizabeth. So, she is made an outcast both from the birth and also throughout her life she has not been able to adjust herself. Her name is another link to the EU which connotes her desire for the Union. The policy of the government on cutting the budget for university lecturers is not even a surprise for her. As the lecturer of history of art Elisabeth felt it was the wrong thing:

All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing. All across the country, people looked up Google: what is EU? All across the country, people looked up Google: move to Scotland. All across the country, people looked up Google: Irish passport applications. All across the country, people called each other cunts. All across the country, people felt unsafe. ... All across the country, people felt sick. All across the country, people felt history at their shoulder. All across the country, people felt history meant nothing (49).

Since Elisabeth is the lecturer of history of art, because art reveals the truth, lifts the veil from the hidden things, she is aware of the chaos going through the country with full awareness. Moreover, towards the end of the book, she also refers to the healing power of literature because Daniel Gluck, who is the voice of the past, Europe and the reason, regains his consciousness. Elisabeth in a way calls him back to life by reading *A Tale of Two Cities*. In all four books of Ali Smith, the references on art with references to other literary texts and pop art go alongside with bitter consciousness of the circumstances. She writes her dissertation on female British pop art painter Pauline Boty who lived between the years of 1938-1966. Her supervisor does not approve the pop art and the artist though Elisabeth insists on her studies. Pauline Boty is another link between politics and art since her work called *Scandal '63* is a painting which shook the political order in England in 1960's. "Secretary of State for War John Profumo, could have had an affair with a 19 year-old would-be model Keeler, whilst she also was involved with a high ranking Soviet Naval Captain at the height of the Cold War", and these intrigue relationships destroyed the reliability and respectability of the Government (MacNeill). In the *Scandal '63*, "Steven Ward, who was involved in organising sexual relationships between prominent upper class figures and Keeler, Profumo, and two other men are figured; Lucky Gordon, a jazz singer, and Rudolph Fenton, two black men with which Keeler also had affairs" (MacNeill).

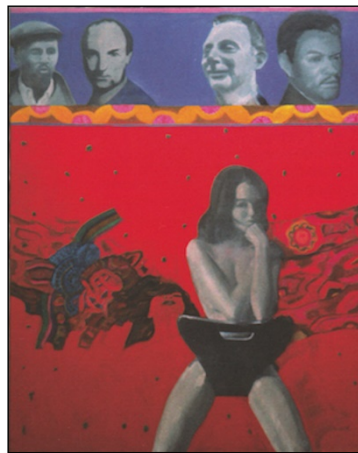


Figure 1 Pauline Boty, *Scandal '63*,

Painting above (fig. 1) and its artist Pauline Boty is found not suitable to be studied in a PhD dissertation by her supervisor:

I'd like to work on the representation of representation in Pauline Boty's work. You can't, the tutor said.

Why can't I? Elisabeth said. There's not nearly enough material available on Pauline Boty, the tutor said. I think there is, Elisabeth said.

There's next to no critical material, he said.

That's one of the reasons I think it'd be a particularly good thing to do, Elisabeth said. I'm your dissertation supervisor, the tutor said, and I'm telling you, there

isn't, and it isn't. You're going off down a rarefied cul-de-sac here. Do I make myself clear?

Then I'd like to apply to be moved to a new supervisor, Elisabeth said. Do I do that with you, or do I go to the Admin office? (Smith 111-112)

Though academic life is supposed to be freed from all kind of restrains and prejudices, her supervisor is the representative of strict observance of the British government. The policy of the government on cutting the budget for university lecturers, Elisabeth's supervisor's objection to her choice of study is all in accordance with the gap between the history of politics and art. The experimental author and literary scholar Josipovici stated that "the UK's cultural life was more European in the 1960s than it is today" (13). However, in the 2000s particularly after Brexit, according to the novel, England both lost her political and artistic ties with Europe. And Elisabeth also knows that she does not belong to a country which promotes discrimination. Even the receptionist in her mother's medical care says, "This passport is expired, the receptionist says. I know, Elisabeth says. I'm in the middle of renewing it. I'm afraid we can't accept an expired ID, the receptionist says. Have you got a driving licence?" (78). But she does not have any driving licence either. She does not seem to belong to neither England nor the EU, because her Id is not valid anymore for her country and England has decided not to be a part of the EU anymore, thus alongside with her problem of national identity, her personal identity is no longer valid. And, it is very ironic to observe that even the word passport is not an English word. It is originally a French word: c. 1500, *passe-porte*, from old French "*passeport*" (Harper, "Etymology of *passeport*"). Although she is a British citizen, her identity is also questioned by the authorities. The gap between her personal and national identity also makes her question herself:

Time and time again. Even in the increased sleep period, with his head on a pillow and his eyes closed, hardly here, he does it, what he's always been able to do. Endlessly charming, Daniel. Charmed life. How does he do it? She'd brought the chair from the corridor. She'd shut the door to the room. She'd opened the book she bought today. She'd started to read, from the beginning, quite quietly, out loud. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, ... we had everything before us, we had nothing before us. The words had acted like a charm. They'd released it all, in seconds. They'd made everything happening stand just far enough away. It was nothing less than magic. Who needs a passport? Who am I? Where am I? What am I? I'm reading (141).

Increased existentialist crisis of Elisabeth is relieved when she realizes that it is the act of reading that makes her feel alive. All these existentialist questions fade away when she sees the link between her reading and Daniel's coming back to life.

The novel, *Autumn*, by including some intertextual references that are used in the creation of a past that very much influenced present needs for the formation of identity, aims at stabilizing the present reimagining past. Returning to the past, in this case, to old narratives in order to present an overview of the same ideas in different centuries and in

different cultures aid Smith to establish a connection between the present and the past. Consequently, the novel shows how pointless it will be trying to unite with the past. However, at the end of the book through the political discourse of the link between France and England and the resurrection of Daniel with the emphasis on the healing power of literature and art, we feel a glimpse of hope for the British and this will also be improved in the following books of *Seasonal Cycle*. The political discourse of the novel is established through the appreciation of art and literature. This echoes the voice of the past and puts the emphasis upon history of art/and history's not belonging to a particular age but to all ages. And consequently, we come to an important awareness at the end that one could survive and connect only through art and literature.

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Published by: Messenger Publications, Stable URL:
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24871401>.