

Symbolical Representations of Brexit in Ali Smith's *Autumn*

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Abstract

This paper provides an empirical analysis of the novel *Autumn* by Scottish author Ali Smith, published in 2016. Our study seeks to contribute to the understanding of the way the author has chosen to represent the cultural and generational gaps on the background of Brexit in the UK in her novel, by providing an in-depth stylistic analysis dwelling on the author's linguistic choices. The applicative part of our study will provide a stylistic investigation of the selected literary text, bringing to the fore the main linguistic features and the symbols the author has chosen in order to depict the general state of the nation and to underline the divisions and the fractions born as a consequence of the 2016 referendum in the UK.

This study addresses several issues related to the cultural and generational gaps already existing in the pre-Brexit period in the UK, which are reflected in Ali Smith's novel. Smith, who considers that all Brexit did was to reveal these gaps, underlines the fact that these misunderstandings and differences had already been there before the UK's decision to withdraw from the European bloc.

The main objective of this paper is to provide a stylistic analysis with special focus on the symbols and symbolism identified in the selected literary text, be they people, marks, locations, or material objects, representing something beyond the literal meaning. Our analysis fosters a more in-depth understanding of the selected literary text, uncovering the hidden yet essential aspects of the novel.

Keywords: *Brexit, Brexlit, national identity, Stylistics, stylistic analysis, symbol, Autumn/autumn.*

1. Conceptual delimitations

Broadly speaking, stylistics is a branch of linguistics studying and interpreting different patterns and lexical items with the aim of understanding the possible meanings of a text. Stylistics was briefly defined as “the study of language in literature” (Toolan 1998, apud Morărașu 2014). “Historically, it arose from the late-19th- and early-20th-century Russian formalist approach to literary meaning, which endeavored to identify the textual triggers of certain literary effects from their structures. As a result, for much of its history, stylistics has been concerned with the style, and consequent meaning, of literary works”. (Lesley Jeffries 2017)

In 2006, Teilanyo considered it “a hybrid discipline criss-crossing literary criticism and linguistics”. We embrace the idea that stylistics is a complex field of study aiming to arrive to an objective interpretation of the literary text, acknowledging at the same time the subjectivity of the conducted analysis that is inevitably marked by the different literary effects the selected text produces on the reader.

Stylistics focuses on language and the function of texts in context. (Simpson 2004, apud Morărașu 2014). Our study focuses on the linguistic choices of the author, taking into consideration the moment when the novel was written and the socio-historical background, the symbolical meaning of the chosen lexical items meant to enrich our ways of exploring language and to help us better understand the selected text and what it communicates about the society it depicts.

The term *cultural gap* is used to refer to misunderstandings or differences within a society. Such differences include the values, behaviour, education, and customs of the respective cultures. The term was originally used to describe the difficulties encountered in interactions between early 20th century travellers and pre-industrial cultures, but has since been used more broadly to refer to mutual misunderstandings and incomprehension arising with people from differing backgrounds and experiences. Cultural gaps can relate to religion, ethnicity, age, or social class (Mezcua & Valverde Ferrer 2020).

2. Socio-historical background

In the context of a technologized era, marked by increasingly frequent and intense cultural encounters, the concept of identity has become one of the challenging concepts that Burke (2009: 39) described as being part of the jungle of concepts fighting for survival. Due to cultural hybridity and heterogeneity such concepts as nationality, nationalism and national identity are often said to be in decline. Throughout history, people have been attached to their native ground, to the traditions of their ancestors, and to established territorial authorities, but it was not until the end of the 18th century that nationalism began to be a generally recognized sentiment moulding public and private life and one of the great, if not the greatest, single determining factors of modern history, turning nationalism, usually considered a concept closely related to the past, into a modern movement as well.

National identity and nationalism represent a crucial aspect in the UK's history as well. Historians argue that England already had a sense of national identity under the Anglo-Saxons, a millennium before the Germans and the Italians. Yet, today's English nationalism is a very different beast from the classic variety that George Orwell celebrated in *England, Your England*, in 1941. The social and economic crises, the tumultuous times that Europe has been going through in the last decade distracted the attention of the leaders of the European institutes from a dangerous tendency towards a radical nationalism fuelled by vehement patriotic speeches. All these aspects will be explored in the first chapter of our study which will focus on identity crises in socio-political contexts, specifically in UK's pre-Brexit period.

Dutt¹ (1949: 200-201) defined a crisis as "the best and the sternest teacher. When an old way comes to an end, a new way will and must be found". But there is a period of transition which divides the two ways

¹ R. Palme Dutt, leading journalist and theoretician in the Communist Party of Great Britain.

mentioned by Dutt and during such a period, a nation faces crisis. Our study will explore the way the UK's citizens had to cope with the identity crises generated by their own decision from 2016 to withdraw from the European bloc and the projection of these identity crises in the selected literary text.

The ambiguity, the misleading sources of information, the speculation of each impactful event on both national and international levels led to gaps, divisions and fractions not only in the way of thinking but also in the way the British citizens felt about themselves. Before being a phenomenon which questioned UK's path in the European bloc, Brexit was a phenomenon questioning people's sense of identity. In fact, Brexit is often seen as the culminating issue in the aftermath of the collapse of the British empire, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as the transformation of the British identity. In a globalized world of changing identities, marked by cultural encounters and exchanges, where the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, the local and the global (Appadurai 1996: 49) is both contested and embraced, the United Kingdom's decision is grounded on the political and cultural struggles for national identity and sovereignty and the results of the EU referendum in 2016 are the reflection of the existing cultural and intergenerational gaps.

3. Brexit Fiction

Brexit was a phenomenon strong enough to inspire a literary movement the *Financial Times* dubbed Brexlit. Authors began writing and what today we call Brexlit quickly emerged. It deals directly or indirectly with the causes and implications of the Brexit referendum. Therefore, when the future of the UK changed in 2016, so did literature. The literary texts written in the post-Brexit period reflect personal views on the phenomenon, some of them depicting a hopeless landscape, others, on the contrary, presenting a hopeful perspective. Therefore, the texts belonging to this literary movement can be divided into two categories, taking into consideration the author's view of the

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phenomenon, texts depicting UK as a nation at a crossroads but strong enough to move on and texts describing a divided country which has lost its equilibrium, a country with no future.

Brexlit addressed the mind-bending horror of Brexit, as Ali Smith described it in *Autumn*. It focused on the political cleavage between Brexiters and Remainers and on the deep cultural and attitudinal divisions caused by Brexit which will haunt the British political life for decades. In a recently edited volume, *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, Robert Eaglestone (2018) observes that literature broadens our ability to think, feel and argue. Consequently, fiction might afford an especially useful and appropriate way to address political arguments about national identity which lie at the heart of Brexit.

Autumn, which is considered to be the first post-Brexit novel, published only four months after the 2016 referendum in the UK, is part of a quartet Ali Smith wrote, four seasonal works in which, as its author declared, tried to depict the nation's state. Many other writers explored the anxieties and fractures in British society: from Euroscepticism, to immigration, to devolution issues, etc. Sam Byer's *Perfidious Albion* (2018), Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), and Ali Smith's Seasonal Novels (2016-2019) are just a few of them.

The novel, which some scholars consider a Brexlit masterpiece, while others a Brexit meditation, mirroring the British society during tumultuous times, was written in the immediate post-referendum period and Ali Smith herself is aware both of the fact that the novel speaks about a phenomenon which was still going on at the moment when it was published and of the novel's tremendous power and impact despite the uncertain and confused period it depicts. Ali Smith defined Brexit herself in an interview for *The Guardian* in 2019: "Brexit is a fracturing of our time: life before the vote, life after the vote".² The division inside one and the same country was considered to be one of the first outcomes of the 2016 referendum in the UK, yet Smith insists in

the same interview that nothing was really new, the cultural gaps and the generational gaps were already there and all Brexit did was to reveal them:

Brexit's divisions? They aren't new. Brexit has just made them properly visible to us all...nothing is really new in what's happening to us now. It's all there in classical myth, in *Gilgamesh*, in Homer; Dickens's *Hard Times*, considering what happens when a country's people become fodder to the latest industrial technology and the people who control it; Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, all about the fallout from fake news, and his *Pericles*, the fallout from bad governance. (Smith 2019)

Our study will focus precisely on these fractions and gaps and the way Smith chose to reflect them in her novel.

The author addresses her readers in a written form, so the message of the novel could have been subjected to revision before being published. Taking into consideration that the author of the novel is still alive, we can speak about a relationship between Ali Smith and her readers as, nowadays, technology provides us with various means of getting in touch with each other and enables us to freely express our ideas and opinions even by simply chatting or adding a comment on a literary review.

Brexit was born as a consequence of Brexit. It is one of its positive outcomes as creation, literary creation in this case, can only bring positive aspects in a tumultuous period in the history of a nation.

Nevertheless, Bernard (2019) questions the literary texts' power and accuracy in revealing the full magnitude of the identity crisis in the pre- and post-Brexit period in the UK:

Is literature truly incapable of confronting the full magnitude of the identity crisis the Brexit referendum has precipitated and come to crystallize, in a dizzying conflation of political agency

and symptomatology? Is literary representation so depleted and historically impotent that it can only address the sense of crisis negatively, by reneging on its historical responsibility.

4. A Stylistic Approach to Ali Smith's *Autumn*

4.1. Methodology

This research is done by means of a descriptive and qualitative methodology. We will employ a qualitative research method, the stylistic analysis, conforming to the three basic principles Simpson coined (2004: 4), the three 'Rs': rigorous, retrievable and replicable. The stylistic analysis should be rigorous, meaning that it is based on a structure meant to guide us in the interpretation of language and pattern process. The stylistic analysis should be retrievable, so the analysis must be regulated through explicit criteria and terms, which means it is approved by other stylisticians. The consensus allows other researchers to follow the path then adopted in the analysis, to examine the categories used and to see how the analysis reaches its conclusions. The fact that stylistic analysis should be replicable refers to the fact that the method must be transparent enough to allow others to verify it, either by testing it in the same text or by applying it outside the text.

Taking the quotation selected by Morărașu (2014: 93) as our starting point: "Style is as much under the words as in the words. It is as much the soul as it is the flesh of a work (Gustave Flaubert)", our study is meant to go beyond words and identify the symbolical meaning of the lexical items the author has chosen in order to depict the fractions and the divisions which existed in the UK, both in the pre-referendum period and in the post-Brexit period, in the selected literary text.

4.2. The Research Question

Our study is an attempt to provide answers to the following questions: How did Ali Smith use language in order to mirror the general state of the post-Brexit society, the cultural gaps and the generational gaps as symptoms of the national identity crisis in her

novel *Autumn*? What are the most significant symbols used so as to represent Brexit-related aspects and issues?

4.3. The Objective of the Study

Our study starts from the premise that, on the one hand, the language an author chooses to employ in order to produce a written text is closely linked to the wider socio-cultural context in which it is produced and received. The background is an essential aspect taking into consideration the fact that the novel *Autumn* was published only four months after the EU referendum. On the other hand, the author's linguistic choices are connected to his/her perception and understanding of reality and the symbols employed are meant to depict the subjective reality of Ali Smith, the author, the UK citizen.

4.4. Discussion - Linguistic Features and Symbolism

The main symbol of the novel is *autumn*. Most of the novel is set in autumn. Autumn marks the beginning of change, the starting point when the old year fades away. It can easily remind the reader of Brexit and the UK's 47-year membership of the European Union coming to an end (exiting from it). There are other important symbols in the novel such as: the roses, "the sky all threats" (Smith 2016: 53) symbolizing the uncertain future of the UK or even rival countries speculating the moment, Brexit.

The relationship between Elisabeth and her mother is also projected symbolically. The conflict between the two generations represented in the novel by Elisabeth, on the one side, and her mother, on the other side, is highlighted by the presence of Daniel, an alternative of Elisabeth's dead father. As a child, Elisabeth disobeyed her mother by keeping in touch with Daniel. The same conflict between generations was revealed when the results of the referendum became public and then analysed as it was argued by various surveys made in the immediate post-referendum period that older people voted Leave while younger people voted Remain. The main reason why older people chose

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to leave the EU were national identity issues and immigration seen as a threat to national identity and culture. Wendy, Elisabeth's mother, considers Daniel's friendship a threat. Daniel himself can be associated to the old continent perceived as a threat by the old citizens of the UK who preferred keeping a nostalgic picture of Great Britain.

In Smith's novel, the main symbol can be easily identified as the author has chosen to use it for the title of the novel itself, *autumn*. In our case, Brexit is autumn as both concepts are united by one common idea: change. During autumn, so many phenomena take place in order to make the transition to the last season of the year: winter. In the same manner, Brexit brought change in all fields and domains and at all levels of life both in UK and in Europe.

This symbol gives rise to the conceptualization of a complex phenomenon as Brexit is meant to be one of the four seasons of the year, autumn. Smith did not randomly choose autumn as it is the season of darkening nights, cooler temperature and cloudy weather. The author of the novel might have also thought about the fact that in American English, *autumn* is *fall*. Autumn or fall, it is either a very suggestive lexical item used by the author to depict the way some of the British citizens considered Brexit. Autumn is the first cold season, it divides the year into two halves: a cold one, represented by autumn itself and winter, and a warm one, represented by spring and summer. Brexit, a phenomenon amplifying the already existing fractions in UK had the same effect of fractioning and dividing the UK citizens.

Ali Smith brilliantly uses language to depict the general state of a nation shaken by the national crisis generated by Brexit. She uses words to gradually build the general atmosphere, from the immediate impact of the results of the referendum and the first symptoms of the crisis, to the pick of the crisis and eventually to its temporarity and fleetingness.

Autumn is a season rich in symbolism. It is the peak of the natural cycle, the moment when all things change. These changes are similar to the changes the UK was going through during the pre-referendum and post-referendum period. In the novel, it is meant to

make the connection to the maturity of a nation at a crossroads, a nation questioning its own identity and struggling to find its own way.

The novel is rife with lexical items, more specifically nouns and verbs, belonging to the semantic field of autumn. Smith frequently mentions “the wind distinctly harsh” (Smith 2016: 3), “the harvest, the sun out, the fallen leaves”, Smith 2016: 9), “the dead leaves”, “the scattered leaves” (Smith 2016: 9), etc.

Smith obsessively uses the noun “leaves” all across the novel in order to depict a picture about magic and transformation (Smith 2016: 9), very similar to the period the UK was crossing when the novel was published. Autumn is not meant to suggest that there is no solution to or escape from the difficult situation, or no hope, on the contrary, it symbolizes rebirth, renewal, a natural period of transitional change or crisis which will be followed naturally by a period of growth and prosperity.

The manner Smith has chosen to conclude in the last lines of the novel, in contrast to the first two sentences at the beginning of the novel, reminding a dickensian refrain, “It was the worst of times. It was the worst of times” (Smith 2016: 3), came to enhance the same idea: “But there are roses, there are still roses” (Smith 2016: 260). The author uses contrastive pictures in order to emphasize the idea of hope by projecting the picture of a country compared to “a bush that looks done”, brilliantly employing symbolism. Though the UK seemed to be nothing but a bush that looked done after the results of the referendum became public, the picture of a colourful wide-open rose comes to suggest that there is future, there is hope after all the windy nights (Smith 2016: 259), on a landscape which “seems closer to winter than autumn, with the trees revealing their structures and the leaves stuck to the ground” (Smith 2016: 260).

The author develops the same idea by comparing the EU referendum to a leaf falling from the tree in autumn, leaving its leafshape behind, the shadow of a leaf meant to last on the pavement till next spring (Smith 2016: 260). It is a moment in UK’s history to

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remember but it still is a fleeting moment. The moment of national crisis in the UK is compared to autumn and all the natural phenomena which take place during this season each year. It is part of a natural process and cycle the same way a crisis of a nation is naturally followed by a period of prosperity. The cycle of nature and time and its characteristics are thus similar to what happens in society and politics.

Whether it is projected past midsummer (Smith 2016: 260), in late September, Smith 2016: 260), on another Friday in October (Smith 2016: 67), or now when the weather is September (Smith 2016: 85), when October is a blink of an eye (Smith 2016: 177), or simply on one of the days of the week, in one of the seasons of the year (Smith 2016: 163), the action of the novel, though fragmented and ambiguous, leaping from one period of Elisabeth's lifetime to another, is always connected to autumn. Smith does not mention all the months of autumn in the novel but also provides suggestive and revealing descriptions of autumn all across the novel using such adjectives as "cold", "ravaged", "high", "bright", "golden", "mild", "cool", and such nouns as "wind", "leaves", "trees", "landscape", "sky", etc in order to depict the general atmosphere in the UK, in the immediate post-referendum period.

Autumn is the season that gives us the opportunity to accept and honor the cycles of birth, growth and death on all levels. The same way, in the novel, Brexit is a phenomenon meant to teach the UK the lesson of growth, of impermanence and acceptance. The UK leaves the EU as a consequence of its own decision to withdraw from the European bloc. The author emphasizes the fact that such a radical decision is naturally followed by change in all fields and on all levels of life and all the UK had to do about it was embrace it as part of the natural cycle. Brexit is autumn with all its positive and negative connotations. Autumn symbolizes Brexit in the novel.

There is another significant and essential symbol in the novel: the rose. By the end of the novel, Smith mentions it in order to suggest the idea of hope and rebirth. Smith's choice is not a random one as the national flower of England is the rose. The flower has been adopted as England's emblem since the time of the Wars of the Roses - civil wars

(1455 – 1485) between the royal house of Lancaster, whose emblem was a red rose, and the royal house of York, whose emblem was a white rose. Consequently, the term ‘the Wars of the Roses’ was born when it was used by Sir Walter Scott when referring to that conflict as such in his novel, *Anne of Geierstein*. The Wars of the Roses ended with the clever and strategic Henry VII being crowned king of England and marrying Elizabeth of York in 1486.

Smith chose this flower in order to suggest that there is hope and to remind the way the War of the Roses ended by combining the two roses in order to give birth to the famous Tudor Rose which was both white and red. Consequently, the rose became known as “the flower of England”, and it is today the country’s national flower. In the same manner, the UK can find a way to build a strong and prosperous relationship with the European Union. It does not have to turn into war, on the contrary, it is a good opportunity for the two sides to find an agreement.

Brexit literature can be divided into two categories: one presenting a positive perspective of post-Brexit Britain and another one depicting a dystopian vision of the UK, as a consequence of its withdrawal from the European bloc. Smith’s novel is part of the hopeful category of literary works belonging to Brexit, though it signals many problematic issues existing after the vote. *Autumn* ends on a positive note, with the symbolical picture of a wide-open rose set against the rusting furniture in the garden. Dulcie Everitt (2021) beautifully concludes:

The presence of roses on the last page of the novel symbolizes both love and rebirth, hope for England. Smith allows time to expand and life to explode and she reminds us that even something as devastating as Brexit cannot prevent the passage of time... and art people and events are all part of an endless, ongoing cycle. (Everitt 2021: 154)

4.5. Limitations of the study

Broadly speaking, the limitations and boundaries of a study are constraints upon the study that are acknowledged in order to avoid misrepresentation. Best and Kahn (1993: 40) defined limitations as “those conditions beyond the control of the researcher that may place restrictions on the conclusion of the study and their application to other situations”.

Our study provides a pertinent perspective on Smith’s novel based on personal observations and conclusions. It is generally accepted by scholars that Smith did not choose the title of her novel randomly. Smith skilfully employs language using symbolism to project the state of a nation at a crossroads. The limitation of our study consists in the fact that interpretation is always subjective. Therefore, our conclusions are never neutral, they bear the mark of our values, beliefs, and ideologies.

Conclusions

Our study enhances the idea that meaning, which is neither stable nor absolute, depends on the linguistic structures the author uses in the selected text and the interpretation process undertaken by the reader. The symbols identified in the novel are meant to deepen the meaning of the literary text, taking into consideration the context and relying on shared cultural understanding.

In addition, our stylistic analysis is meant to inspire reflection on the way language and symbolism can be used to project the crisis of a nation in literary texts and provides relevant context for discussions surrounding identity crises generated by Brexit and the way they were projected across literary texts.

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