

EUROPEAN MIGRANTS AS “STRANGE” FIGURES IN ALI SMITH’S *AUTUMN*

PERSONAS MIGRANTES EUROPEAS COMO FIGURAS “EXTRAÑAS” EN *AUTUMN* DE ALI SMITH

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185

Abstract

This article examines the representation of the European protagonist in *Autumn* by Ali Smith from a gender, intersectional and cultural studies perspective. The novel is a pioneering work in Brexlit, an emergent literary movement which aims to reflect the current political and social landscape of the United Kingdom after the 2016 European Union referendum. Firstly, this article offers an overview of the political, social and literary phenomenon of Brexlit, followed by an outline of Sara Ahmed’s theorisation of the sociological concept of the stranger. Secondly, the article further contextualises Brexit fiction, presenting its crucial role in putting forward a fair portrayal of migrants, a collective largely misrepresented in the UK media. The article then considers the centrality of Ali Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet* to the reworking of the British social imaginary. The subsequent two sections explore the encounters in which Daniel’s strange(r)ness manifests itself through his heterogeneous and relational yet singular identity, owing to his connection to the migratory experience. Retaining his differences and from a position of agency, the solidary bonds he establishes with Elisabeth convey strange(r)ness as a label that must be overcome in order to ensure a better coexistence within the British nation.

Keywords: Brexit, migration, the figure of the stranger, European citizenship.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la representación del protagonista europeo en *Autumn*, de Ali Smith, desde una perspectiva de género, interseccional y de estudios culturales. Esta obra es pionera en Brexilit, un movimiento literario emergente que pretende reflejar el actual panorama político y social del Reino Unido tras el referéndum europeo de 2016. En primer lugar, este trabajo ofrece una visión general del fenómeno político, social y literario del Brex(1)it, seguido de un esbozo de la teorización de Sara Ahmed sobre el concepto sociológico del extraño. En segundo lugar, el artículo contextualiza la ficción del Brexit, otorgándole un papel crucial en la justa representación de las personas migrantes, un colectivo cuya realidad ha sido frecuentemente tergiversada en los medios británicos. Por tanto, el artículo considera la centralidad del cuarteto estacional de Ali Smith en la reconstrucción del imaginario social británico. Las dos secciones siguientes exploran los encuentros en los que la extrañeza de Daniel se manifiesta a través de su identidad heterogénea y relacional, aunque singular, debido a su conexión con la experiencia migratoria. Conservando sus diferencias y desde una posición de agente, los lazos solidarios que establece con Elisabeth transmiten la extrañeza como una etiqueta que debe ser superada para asegurar una mejor convivencia dentro de la nación británica.

Palabras clave: Brexit, migración, la figura de la extraña, ciudadanía europea.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyse, through the lens of notions related to strangeness, the representation of the character embodied by a European migrant in Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), the opening novel of her *Seasonal Quartet*. Close reading techniques are combined with an interdisciplinary and theoretical approach to the analysis of the novel based on gender, intersectional, cultural and migration studies. The novel concerns Brexit, in particular the political and social climate in which the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union originated on June 23, 2016. The "(proposed) withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union", as the Oxford Dictionary defined it in 2017, has given rise to a post-referendum literary movement by the name of Brexilit. The term first appeared in a 2017 Financial Times article which featured Scottish author Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) as the most salient example of Brexit fiction. Smith's work is pioneering within this emergent literary movement given that her works engage directly with the state of the British nation before, during and after the vote on European membership. The omniscient narrator that guides us through the *Seasonal Quartet* infiltrates the consciousnesses of an array of characters belonging to a variety of

cultural backgrounds, from people born and bred on British soil to those with European roots but either fully settled in the UK, or trying to settle, or just staying temporarily. While attention will be paid to all, the focus of this work will be mainly on those who find themselves in the latter categories. There is a great deal of significance in the fact that the characters of the *Seasonal Quartet* who mirror the formulation of ‘strange figures’ in Ali Smith’s fiction all share a connection to the migratory experience. In times of exacerbated Euroscepticism and xenophobia, not only is the task of representing characters embodied by European migrants a political one, but so is placing them at the hinges of the narrative. Smith’s representation of strange(r)ness subverts contemporary political discourses tasked with clouding the public perception of —European, in the case of *Autumn*—migrants. In doing so, she places them in “structural and ethical roles” that sway the narrative towards “perceptual, even ethical and political readjustments of the people and the societies they encounter” (Masters 2021: 982).

For that reason, the backbone for the analysis of Daniel will be the work of feminist academic and author Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (2000). Ahmed draws on feminist and postcolonial theory to explain the experiences of otherness and marginalisation that arise from current phenomena such as migratory movements, globalisation and multiculturalism. Thus, Ahmed offers a critical and innovative analysis of contemporary strangeness, as she reveals the negative assumption behind an ethics that embraces it. The stranger is understood as a tangible figure with a meaning of their own. Thus, she criticises what she terms the “stranger fetishism” of earlier thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman. Essentially, by characterising the stranger as an ontological figure (stranger-as-figure) with a life, name and referent of their own, the particularities at play in their histories of determination are erased. If this was the case, we would be assuming that the circumstances in which migrants, foreigners and refugees find themselves are alike, since “all forms of movement, travel and displacement [...] lead to the same place: the place of the stranger” (Ahmed 2000: 7).

Ahmed suggests considering the stranger as the outcome of the processes of inclusion and exclusion that result from the construction of borders between bodies and epistemic, neighbouring or travelling communities. To achieve this, she resorts to encounters, whether physical or figurative, between two or more elements, which are inherent in the configuration of human and non-human identities. According to Ahmed, such encounters produce antagonistic conflicts, for although both elements lack the necessary information to take control of the situation, one of them possesses the power of definition and uses it to designate itself as subject by establishing the boundaries of the familiar around its own identity. The presence of the stranger, while out-of-place and beyond the familiar,

destabilises these very limits since its presence cannot be interpreted immediately. Hence, the figure of the stranger does not stand for that which we fail to recognise, but for what we have already recognised as strange. In order to shed some light on these asymmetrical power roles, Ahmed ponders on the impact of previous encounters, which are also framed within certain power relations and social antagonism. These encounters take place both in the present and in the past, in specific and general terms. Thus, the repeated recognition of strangers designates certain human traits as such, while simultaneously outlining, strengthening and legitimising the borders of a given community. The sociological concept of the stranger as formulated by Ahmed will prove highly effective for the later close reading of *Autumn*, which will delve into themes of natives' framing of otherness, and migrants' forms of agency and belonging. Additionally, Ahmed's contemporaneous theorisation will also be of use when considering the current degree of social exclusion experienced by European migrants generally.

2. European Strangeness in Post-referendum Literature

188

Kristian Shaw, in *Brexlit: British Literature and The European Project* (2021), provided an elaborate definition of the literary movement we have come to know as Brexlit. According to Shaw, the works belonging to this genre are concerned with either reflecting imaginatively, responding directly or dealing with the socio-cultural, economic and racial consequences that followed the UK's exit from the European Union (2021: 4). According to a number of scholars who have worked on this matter (Eaglestone 2018; Keller and Habermann 2021; Shaw 2021), the Brexit aftermath did not fracture the nation as much as it revealed a high degree of social, cultural, economic and identity dissatisfaction across virtually the entirety of British society. Nonetheless, debates surrounding the British referendum are undisputedly driven by xenophobic stances based on a long-standing Eurosceptic tradition. Such a sentiment is described as originally English by Robert Harmsen and Menno Spiering, who also argue that it has contributed to a sense of awkwardness in regard to the swift progress of the European Union's common policies (2005: 13).

Thus, the 2016 referendum was the ultimate expression of this sentiment, targeting the millions of European citizens residing in the UK as the main cause of strain on the British public services. In this sense, a number of papers (Eaglestone 2018; Berberich 2021; Shaw 2021) have argued that this movement has become an inexpugnable fortress of cosmopolitanism, an imaginary stage that allows for the debating and rethinking of interpersonal relations through national and cultural borders. Such a vision is reminiscent of Benedict Anderson's approach, who

pointed to the commodification of the press as a key ingredient in the shaping of modern imaginary nations (1991: 44-46). In this regard, it is significant to consider the work of Dulcie Everitt, author of *BrexLit – The Problem of Englishness in Pre- and Post-Brexit Referendum Literature* (2022). Everitt argues that the corpus of BrexLit stands in opposition to some works of English literature published before the referendum; she refers specifically to Julian Barnes’s *England, England* (1996) and Jonathan Coe’s *The Rotters’ Club* (2001). Thus, she contends that it is their approach to the idea of Englishness that drives them apart, for those works that came before the referendum offer a problematisation of Englishness, whereas post-referendum literature attempts to resolve it (2022: 22).

As a whole, the cultural production resulting from Brexit, including literature, has been criticised for two reasons. First of all, it has been faulted for attending to the consequences of the referendum from a single point of view: the English one. The use of this singular perspective portrays Brexit as a national issue that affects only those native to the territory, thus ignoring the range of serious situations endured by European migrants working and living in the United Kingdom. A long way from literary Realism, BrexLit works lie in between fiction and history, owing to the chronological and geographical nearness of the events they feature. For that reason, Christine Berberich states that such exclusion serves to reinforce the portrayal of EU migrants as marginal and “disenfranchised outsiders” in British society (2021: 168, 180). Conversely, while it is true that some works include characters embodied by Europeans, namely Linda Grant’s *A Stranger City* (2020) or Adam Thorpe’s *Missing Fay* (2017), they often appear as token characters. Thereby, their characterisation abides by stereotypes that perpetuate their marginal position while revealing unresolved concerns about British racial and cultural superiority.

However, there is something to be said about the inequalities among European nationalities, especially those concerning the treatment they are subjected to. Starting from the literature, this point was raised by Vedrana Veličković in an article on the token representation of Eastern European migration, in which she writes: “Eastern Europeans are builders, plumbers, agricultural workers, nannies, au pairs, care workers, trafficked and exploited women in need of rescuing and educating, unruly and sexist men” (2020: 649). This disparity is also to be found in cultural and migratory studies, where the circulation of Central and Eastern European migrants has been studied in view of the negative impact it has on the welcoming society’s labour market. Alternatively, the mobility of northeastern Europeans is mostly depicted as tolerable from the welcoming society’s perspective owing to the commercial value of their skills and/or financial independence (Lafleur and Mescoli 2018: 481).

That being said, both characterisations rest on the idea that migrants are unable to settle permanently in one place, and thus, their ability to establish emotional ties of belonging with the territory, as well as interpersonal relationships with their neighbours, is easily denied (Lafleur and Mescoli 2018; Taulant and Daffyd Jones 2018; Mas Giralt 2020). Even though this representation did not begin with the referendum or the hostile political environment, the context in which both occur is ideal for examining the dynamics of belonging “as it has shifted national and supranational boundaries in an aggressive manner, juxtaposing collective identities, creating uncertainties and foreboding crises” (Ranta and Nancheva 2018: 2). The context of the referendum has emphasised the responsibility of producing academic and literary works that examine and attribute value to the ways in which European migrants assert their sense of belonging, namely through what is known in migration studies as embedding (Ryan and Mulholland 2015). This notion is useful in highlighting the efforts migrants make when integrating in a new community, seeing as it relates both to practical aspects —the bureaucracy and participation in the community and in the labour market— and to the idea of home, based on the emotional bond between individuals and a community and/or a geographical location (Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz 2021: 26). Dynamism is a pivotal aspect of embedding, essential in expressing the contingency that dictates interpersonal and territorial bonds. Thus, some of Brexit’s pending tasks include exposing the exclusion processes that identify European migrants as strange figures, owing to their association with migrancy, and avoiding reductive representations that lead to stranger fetishism by including characterisation that attests to the different European nationalities, as well as to other variables —age, social class, gender and geographical locality.

Ali Smith —born in Scotland, a territory that voted overwhelmingly in favour of remaining in the EU— attempts to tackle these tasks with her *Seasonal Quartet*, published as a “time-sensitive experiment” during the referendum campaign and post-Brexit scenario (Smith 2019). This was purely coincidental, as with the publication of *Autumn* Ali Smith was far from trying to make a personal statement about Brexit. She ruminates: “[t]he novel form is always unfailingly about the mesh of time and society, and people caught up in both” (in Orhanen 2020). This dislike of categorisation is shared by Smith’s fellow Scots and contemporary writers Jackie Kay, Janice Galloway and A.L. Kennedy. Following the leading female voices of the Second Scottish Renaissance in the 1980s, Smith and her contemporaries aimed to further explore issues of gender and national belonging “through interrogation of boundaries of private/public spaces, centre/margin dichotomies, proposing models of identity which deviate from stable readings of home (lands) and roots” (Germanà 2012: 153). However, Smith’s latest works have already been recognised as leading a branch of Brexit that distils hope and is headed

towards the creation of spaces that foster national and transnational dialogues. To this end, Smith resorts to literary devices such as intertextuality, stream of consciousness and multiple perspective so as to reflect the degree of social detachment that prevails in present-day UK, whilst still inching towards an “ideal of dialogical communication and political solidarity to overcome this state of paralysis” (Pittel 2021: 123).

3. Framing the Other: Strangeness at (whose) Home?

Written during the 2016 British referendum campaign on the European project, *Autumn* is the first of the four novels that comprise Ali Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet*. As such, the first specific temporal reference we encounter locates us “just over a week after the vote” (2016: 53). Despite the lack of specific geographical indications, a series of brief clues dispersed across the narrative space allows us to venture that the main characters live in an English village to the north of London —“she had gone down to London” (2016: 98). Both hints verge on indeterminacy —not fully vague nor rigorous— thus placing the referendum, the novel’s main point of reference, on a polyhedral stage: historical and contemporaneous, general and particular. Such a wide range of available perspectives also works to broaden the definitions that govern nostalgic national identities such as the English one, allowing for peaceful coexistence with multicultural, European and/or hybrid ones.

In *Autumn*, it is not linearity that gives meaning and cohesion to the narrative but the coalescence of “scattered stories and memories” that have led Smith’s narrative to be dubbed fragmentary (Baker 2022). As Timothy C. Baker puts it, although these fragments will not be a panacea for the world’s ills, their —or rather our— constellation-like disposition situates us in immediate contact with everything around us. Baker contends that fragmentary narratives such as Smith’s rely on this discursive and stylistic brokenness to provide “new ideas of connection and community” (2022: 191). As for the work under analysis, the driving plot rests on a series of existential and historical links: the long-lasting friendship between its two protagonists —Elisabeth and Daniel, a successful yet unknown musical composer. Their friendly bond begins when Elisabeth and her mother move house, becoming Daniel’s next-door neighbours. Despite the number of factors that set Daniel and Elisabeth apart, namely their age —during their first encounter, Elisabeth is a child and he is of old age— as well as their origins —Elisabeth is English and Daniel grew up in Germany and England— their friendship emerges out of the need of getting to know and respecting your closest neighbours.

Ahmed’s contributions on the role of strangers in this type of relationship become especially pertinent when examining their particular friendship. Based on the

analysis she offers of what is known in Australia as “the Bell debate”, Ahmed notes how friendship can serve as an excuse to conceal “the operation of an epistemic difference and division” (2000: 67). Essentially, Ahmed questions the legitimacy of the knowledge that results from this type of friendship, since the stranger involved is defined not according to “what it lacks politically and economically, but by their epistemic privilege”, and thus, it becomes an object of knowledge, rather than the subject that generates it (Marotta 2021: 4). From the very start, Smith manages to avoid such a reading of her protagonists’ friendship by means of two elements. In the first place, Elisabeth is barely a child when the two meet, and so even though her status as a native Briton eases her way through the nation, her age makes her less prone to act on potential power asymmetries. On top of this, Daniel’s character is instilled with complexity and agency, making him not only the source of knowledge, but also the one who puts it into practice through his ethical guidance.

192

In addition to this, the voices and minds through which readers experience the political climate prior to and following the 2016 referendum belong, on the one hand, to Elisabeth, whom we meet during her childhood and get to know through her teenage years and into adulthood as a 32-year-old who works as a “no-fixed hours casual contract junior lecturer” in one of London’s universities (2016: 15). On the other hand, Elisabeth’s childhood was spent by the side of her mother, Wendy, whose mindset at times showed signs of nostalgia for the past along with repudiation of the strange. Thus, when Elisabeth comes home from school one day in 1993 with a homework assignment “about history and being neighbours” that requires her to interview her then elderly and still unknown neighbour, her mother urges her to resort to her imagination to fabricate a credible enough interview (2016: 45). However, the child is utterly fascinated with the person inhabiting the neighbouring house, hence her determination to make him the subject of her interview.

Unaware of any details about Daniel’s life, Wendy bases her first impression of the neighbour on the fact that she is unable to interpret a painting visible through a window in the front room of his house, which depicts a stone with a hole in its centre. According to Sara Ahmed, encounters between two unknown beings always entail a power imbalance (2000: 3). In this first figurative encounter, the imbalance between Wendy and her neighbour, whose identity is rendered by this very painting, is made patent as she appoints herself as a privileged subject the instant she defines the painting as pretentious and different. A strange quality is also attributed to Daniel, an inference backed by Ahmed’s understanding that the stranger is the outcome of processes of inclusion and exclusion that result from the construction of borders between bodies and epistemic, neighbouring and travelling

communities. As such, the authority which Wendy grants herself enables her to conjecture that “[h]e probably can’t speak very good English” (2016: 44). Within this assumption, we do not only find a complete alignment of the terms foreigner and stranger, but also a reification of the latter, as it turns them into an actual figure with specific features that help identify them as well as others displaying the same characteristics. Moreover, Wendy’s response could be attributed to the imminent possibility of a face-to-face encounter with Daniel, or between Daniel and Elisabeth, since “proximity is imagined then as the possibility of future injury” (Ahmed 2004: 67). Following Ahmed’s arguments on fear, this entails a present relation of proximity; however, it is also based on past encounters—in this case, involving other foreigners. When assigning some other with the quality of being “fearsome”, Ahmed mentions the use of stereotypes to determine the other’s definition, as can be seen in Wendy’s commentary on Daniel (2004: 63). It is precisely the act of attributing a negative effect that causes fear to move around and stick to other signs and/or bodies, which clarifies Wendy’s reluctance and her desire to keep a distance between Elisabeth and Daniel.

While the behaviour exhibited by Wendy could be said to abide by the discourse that is expected of the nation—one that requires “some-body or some-where to not-be in order for it to be” (Ahmed 2000: 99), that is, someone with different artistic references or a different accent—Elisabeth’s attitude corresponds to the other side of the same coin. After hearing her mother’s allegations about their neighbour’s “arty” or pretentious art (2016: 44), Elisabeth resorts to introspection, to observing the familiar, as she turns to examine the very paintings that hang in their living room: “the picture of the river and the little house. The picture of the squirrels made from bits of real pinecone” (Smith 2016: 44). In her artistic description, Elisabeth remains rigorously objective until the end, including her analysis of the family portraits. In this sense, the differences Wendy spots in Daniel’s character are not equally perceived by Elisabeth, who does not feel the need to impose her own identity over the stranger’s and does not seem overprotective over what constitutes her “space of the familial”: her home, family and memories (Ahmed 2000: 8).

In her way of thinking, Wendy’s attitude could be associated with a more traditional English consciousness, one based on past nostalgia, ignorance, superiority. In contrast, her daughter Elisabeth could be said to embody a British identity or contemporary Britishness. This designation has been, since the coming into force of the British Nationality Act in 1981, strongly associated with a multicultural identity, due to its ability to accommodate a European identity, and an open-mindedness towards migrants and other minority groups (Van Der Zwet et al. 2020: 522). Contrary to her mother, who requires the presence of the stranger in

order to reinstate the legitimacy of physical and figurative boundaries, Elisabeth does not jump to conclusions based on preconceived definitions and finds it necessary to have a first-hand account of her neighbour's circumstances, such as "what it was like where the neighbour grew up and what life was like when the neighbour was my age" (2016: 33). Therefore, even though Elisabeth appears to share some of her mother's views—" [t]his town's been a town since long before I was born. If it was good enough for my parents, and my grandparents and my great grandparents..." (2016: 83)— she also exhibits a great degree of curiosity that, together with her tenacity, emphasises her ethical standpoint as she seeks truthfulness and each person's unique characteristics: "[i]t's supposed to be true, Elisabeth said. It's for News" (2016: 44). Hence, the kind words the youth writes about her wise neighbour, without having met him in person, lead Wendy to initiate her first encounter with Daniel with the aim of showing him the said description, as well as to trust him with her daughter's care in her absence.

Over the course of their friendship, Daniel avoids sharing with Elisabeth any details regarding the uneasiness that came with his hybrid identity, namely the fact that as a teenager he was identified as a stranger in Germany, where "[a]ll the people on the train [could] see from his clothes that he [wasn't] from here" (2016: 98), as well as in England, where "he also [didn't] quite belong" (2016: 183). A deeper insight into this feeling of unbelonging is provided in the pages of *Summer* (2020), the fourth and closing instalment of the *Seasonal Quartet*. The narrator follows a young Daniel and his father during the early 1940s, a period that saw the British Government, led by the Conservatives, set up prison camps for all Germans and Austrians living in England under accusations of treachery and espionage. The question about Daniel's origin arises on three occasions during his time at the prison camps of Ascot and Kempton Park. An aspect worth highlighting about all three instances is that independently of their outcome, they serve to reinstate Daniel's sense of self and belonging. Indeed, the first of these instances features a young English boy who, from outside the camp territory, spouts tabloid rumours about camp internees at Daniel. Our protagonist does make his English nationality explicitly clear, but the strength of this piece of information lies not in the denomination. Instead, it is the pairing of Daniel's flawless command of the language with his conviction that he belongs wherever his family is. His hybrid identity resurfaces in an encounter with two German brothers, with whom he feels comfortable enough to share his parents' origins and to articulate his identity as a "Summer German" (2020: 100). Lastly, Daniel's contact with a fellow German internee seeking a German and English speaker prompts him to further elaborate on his life-story, which leads him to define his German self as being six years old. Ultimately, what Daniel passes down to Elisabeth are the ways of communicating,

reflecting and being in the world —acquired thanks to his experiences as well as from his sister Hannah— that allow him to belong to a single place, while still being connected to another one and its people. Despite his attitude to life, which already distinguishes him from others, it is important to stress that his difference does not lie in an “I/others” opposition but in his way of conveying what Harald Pittel refers to as “an awareness of the collective dimension of reality” (2021: 127). In order to reach this stage, Daniel adopts an attitude that escapes traditional forms of belonging, such as autochthony, a belief that prioritises blood and soil over cultural belonging. Correspondingly, those native to a given territory are thought to be more entitled to claim ownership or belonging to it.

4. Binding Subjectivities through Nature

The most recurrent symbol permeating *Autumn* —and the rest of the *Seasonal Quartet*— is that of nature. Its changing but recurrent and familiar elements embody an eternal albeit last glimmer of hope. After all, Smith’s works are marked by the depiction of a multicultural, solidary and tolerant yet united British society. The fact that Smith opts to convey an optimistic account of the social situation in post-Brexit Britain does not necessarily mean that reality is set aside to envision a utopian future. Instead, the idea of hope is tethered to nature in all its contingency. Every chapter is introduced by a sentence printed in bold with the apparent purpose of situating the forthcoming action. While we do encounter precise dates, when strung together, the majority of these sentences can be said to belong to an arrangement of individual experiences of the passing of time and references to natural elements. Together with detailed descriptions of leaves thinning or flower buds blooming we find statements such as “[a] minute ago it was June. Now the weather is September” (Smith 2016: 52), which signal the season’s triumph over time as a fixed cultural convention. In short, allusions to the seasons predominate, oscillating between the exactness of dates and the relativity of individual accounts. The narrative cannot be pinned to a sole positionality, its groundedness and multiplicity making it applicable to a great number of contexts.

Nature also makes recurrent appearances in the form of implicit and metaphorical references. We find multiple excerpts that feature elements of nature such as trees, trunks, leaves or flowers. They become essential props in the task of illustrating themes of connectivity and human subjectivity. One could say they seem to appear out of nowhere, but the reality is that their recurrent presence and aid in critical situations (an unconscious Daniel dreaming of witnessing Christine Keeler’s trial from a Scots pine trunk) throw light on a potential that remains untapped. In most cases, it is Daniel that infiltrates tropes of nature into his interactions with Elisabeth

(or with his surroundings). From the beginning of their friendship, Daniel tries to bring out this relational perspective common to all identities through a game by the name of Bagatelle that involves at least two participants and requires them to join efforts as they make up a story together, alternating turns as they each come up with a line. The story can either borrow the plot from a well-known story, those which “people think are set in stone” (2016: 117), or it can start from scratch. Both alternatives imply a break from the rigidity of dominant discourses as they place value on personal and subjective accounts instead.

In the end, Daniel’s intention is to foster Elisabeth’s critical thinking, making her able to contemplate and update seemingly innocuous tales such as that of “Goldilocks and the three bears”. When analysing Elisabeth’s story-making skills, it is evident that her mind is fuelled by the fact that “[t]here was war on the news every day” (2016: 118), and thus resorts to opposing binomials that inevitably place her characters in confrontational situations: true/false, peace/war, victory/loss. As such, Elisabeth arms her character with a gun, granting it an immeasurable amount of power over Daniel’s, a man disguised as a tree. In light of the bleak and tragic ending that awaits them, Daniel bestows Elisabeth with the ethical responsibility of “welcom[ing] people into the home of [her] story” (2016: 119), so that these people are never left resourceless against those with a greater enunciation power, giving them a safe place from which to act. The ending of their shared story is revealed in the next section, where “there’s nothing left of them, the pantomime innocents of the man with the gun, but bones in grass, bones in flowers, the leafy branches of the ash tree above them” (2016: 79). The sight is striking, but the idea that prevails is that nature is human action’s counterpart in providing the opportunity for renewal. However, it is up to us whether we choose to move forward and learn from our mistakes, or whether we decide to remain anchored in our old ways.

Daniel’s insights on dialogue and empathy begin to germinate and flourish within Elisabeth even when, in the present time, a now century-old comatose Daniel is admitted to a care centre. Following the perspective of an unconscious Daniel, the very first pages of the novel find him regaining consciousness on a beach after having been shaken and stripped by the rough sea. In a backdrop deeply reminiscent of the experiences of many asylum seekers, whose only alternative is to flee by sea, Daniel is fortunate enough to survive; however, he is aware that “[i]t will not last, the dream” (2016: 13). The attitudes towards nationalities, especially those coming from individuals who revel in the presumed safety provided by national borders, are contingent on changes in historical, political and social contexts. This understanding exposes the consequences of not making an ethical use of nature’s opportunity for renewal, as it requires ethical awareness and social transformation

so as to lead to progress. This outlook is vital no matter one’s positionality, but given the scope of this work it is significant when applied to post-Brexit times, when the manner of dealing with asylum seekers and/or refugees has been extended to European nationals, or in the case of Daniel, to those with a genealogy that traces back to the continent. In his dream, he seeks shelter in a nearby forest, preserving his physical integrity (after encountering a group of women who see him *au naturel*), as well as his most precious memories. Covered in leaves, Daniel heads back to the beach, where he notices the corpses of adults and minors lying on the beach, as well as people he describes as “human, like the ones on the shore, but these are alive” (2016: 12). In Smith’s work, deciduous leaves symbolise the passing of time and the succession of events over time, as in this case would be the 2015 refugee crisis and the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, which entails a rejection of European identities. Even though Daniel keeps a hold of the leaves that shield him, he still remembers that, the same as deciduous leaves in the autumn, “things fall apart, always have, always will” (2016: 1). This dream works as a reminder of the vulnerability of subordinate identities when the physical and symbolic frontiers of a nation-state are being rearranged. This conception of borders follows that of Popescu, who defines them as “dynamic and creative discontinuities” that are “based on collective historical narratives and on individual identity constructions of self” (in Yuval-Davis et al. 2019: 4-5).

197

As for the Brexit campaign, a number of speeches and slogans on the part of supporters of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU tapped into feelings of postimperial melancholia. This term, coined by Paul Gilroy (2005), throws light on the pathological quality of Britain’s feelings of nostalgia towards its ‘glorious’ past. Although my interpretation of *Autumn* leans towards the context of Brexit, the narrative seeks connections across historical and geographical scales that go way beyond the European continent. The use of intertextuality is one of the many ways in which it does so. Indeed, Daniel’s reflection contains a clear reference to Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), a postcolonial work of fiction that explores the undermining of Nigerian national identity in the face of European colonisation. In its explicitness, this reference helps to further expose the instability inherent to all positionalities.

In a later passage, Daniel extends the symbol of nature as a pillar of hope to languages which, in a process similar to the loss of foliage, regularly recreate their vocabulary, giving rise to ramifications while remaining in the same family. Irrespective of grammatical rules, contact among languages brings about words “grown from several languages” that, according to Daniel, are extraordinary, as is the case of gymkhana (2016: 69). His vocabulary is a reflection of his way of being in the world, as it proves there is room for contradictions. As such, Daniel does not

consider that the fact that our protagonist's name derives from French, as seen in its spelling with an 's' instead of a 'z', automatically makes her abnormal, contrary to the opinion of a passport inspector — “[t]hat’s not the normal way of spelling it” (Smith 2016: 22). This instance takes place as Elisabeth is trying to have her passport renewed. The episode evidences the illusory sense of “normality”, given it is not even available to the entirety of the UK’s native population. Indeed, Elisabeth’s bureaucratic proceedings are brought to a halt as “[her] head is the wrong size” (2016: 24) in the passport photo she hands over to the inspector. Correspondingly, Elisabeth ascribes Daniel’s borderless, relational and communitarian outlook to his European identity: “Daniel’s not gay. He’s European. [...] Or if he is, Elisabeth said, then he’s not just gay. He’s not just one thing or another. Nobody is” (2016: 181). In this instance, Elisabeth goes back on her words to put forward an intersectional understanding of all identities. That is, she acknowledges the complexity and the myriad of factors —gender, ethnicity, social class, sexuality and age, among others— that influence human experience. By informing her mother of the multiple disposition of all identities, she is acting as a mediator between the oppressor’s awareness and the lived realities of humans, especially of those under oppression. Following Audre Lorde’s formulation, Elisabeth would be alleviating Daniel’s burden and thus leaving him to devote his energy to “redefining [himself] and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future” (2007: 112). It is also interesting to notice Wendy’s preceding remark —“why else are you always hanging round an old gay man?”— in light of her character development, as by the end of the novel she is in a relationship with a woman. However, this early denial of relatability signals an almost compulsive backing of institutionalised, rigid identity patterns, possibly to achieve “some illusion of protection” (Lorde 2007: 111).

Smith provides Daniel with a degree of agency that is ubiquitous, contagious, unclassifiable and perennial, neutralising every single try at differentiating between equals —whether they are migrants, natives, refugees or asylum seekers— in the political climate of 2016 when this is precisely what is being promoted: “[f]irst we’ll get the Poles. And then we’ll get the Muslims. Then we’ll get the gypsos, then the gays” (2016: 197). Bleak, essentialist and ostensibly racist, this quote reminds us of the need to assume an intersectional perspective. The main issue lies in the dominant undertone urging us to exclude all subordinate collectives. In this case, differences are evoked to “divide and conquer, segregat[e] [and] fragmentat[e]” (Lugones 2003: 93). In this line of thought, Ahmed notes how strangers become an essential part of multicultural nations as their dislocation is employed by nations to reinforce the national identity of those native to the territory. This identity emerges as a response that is constantly reinforced, in this case by denoting “rightful” violent action and a derogative use of language. This

wider picture is juxtaposed with one that is more appreciative of difference as well as focused on the personal (bearing in mind that as the popular feminist slogan states, the personal is political) by showing us how Daniel’s influence goes beyond his own consciousness. Namely, he builds a bridge between Elisabeth and her mother, and by extension, between two generations at odds on account of British politics and history. Thus, after Elisabeth’s mother has lost touch with Daniel for a period of time, a neighbour of hers informs her that his house has been emptied, and that he has been admitted into a nursing home. This news makes its way to Elisabeth, who eventually spends extended periods of time in the village where her mother lives, which also happens to be the closest to Daniel’s care home. A shift in Elisabeth’s mother’s personality takes place towards the end of the novel, as she begins to behave according to values associated with Daniel and that she has acquired through her daughter.

This transformation can be appreciated through Wendy’s passion for antiques, which also happens to be the most substantial evidence of the ideological and generational differences between her and Elisabeth. Wendy’s elation at having been selected to participate in a television programme about touring antiques shops in search for the most “valuable” item clashes with Elisabeth’s emotional state, who cannot help but dwell on the most recent xenophobic attack she had witnessed, which had been directed towards two Spaniards. In contrast to her mother’s ignorance, Elisabeth is mindful of the magnitude of these individual incidents, as well as of the media’s attempts to keep part of the population stuck in the past, when “the junk from the past is worth money” (2016: 130). The last pages of Smith’s novel take us to the present, when Wendy’s appreciation of antiques remains, although it now stems from a more solidary and communitarian perspective.

Consequently, when she learns, while listening to the radio in her car, that the post of Minister for Refugees has been scrapped, a measure that significantly decreases refugees’ possibilities for integration, Elisabeth’s mother strays from her usual route and drives towards a place encircled by an electrified fence. Owing to a prior scene featuring Elisabeth, we readers know that this fence is patrolled by SA4A officials, a security company that makes recurrent appearances in the other three novels. My contention is that its spelling is a nod to the British security company G4S, one of the largest in the world. The narrative takes this reference further, as Elisabeth tries to unearth a twofold meaning in an encounter with one of the officials: “is that an approximation of the word *safer* or is it more like the word *sofa?*” (Smith 2016: 141, emphasis in original). Ultimately, Elisabeth cannot make sense of the corporate name, as it fluctuates between meaningful and meaningless, socially involved and selfishly detached. This moral ambiguity hints at the corrupt

and opportunistic intentions of the company, urging the readership to read against the grain. Additionally, its functions are also of a contradictory nature. For this purpose, the case of G4S is illuminating in that it played a significant role in the Israeli occupation of Palestine by “running prisons, being involved in checkpoint technology [and] [...] in the deaths of undocumented migrants” (Davis 2016: 144), while also operating centres for abused women and “young girls at risk” (Davis 2016: 144). Similarly, SA4A’s functions range from operating an immigration detention centre to supervising copyright infringement to bussing homeless people to areas where they are more likely to receive alms. Davis ascribes the danger of these all-encompassing corporations to their ability in establishing intersecting connections between our social relations, political contexts and interior lives. Thus, as an act of protest against this evil company, Wendy makes it her mission to short-circuit the fence by throwing one of her antique pieces at it, and insists on coming back to the fence daily to bombard it with “people’s histories and with the artefacts of less cruel and more philanthropic times” (2016: 255). By doing this, Wendy adds a new layer of meaning to the same past glories that once kept her in the dark, inasmuch as they can (and should) have a place in today’s political debates regarding the situation of every single one of the nation’s inhabitants.

200

5. Conclusion

The focal points of this article have been migrants’ representation and ways of belonging, based on Sara Ahmed’s characterisation of the stranger not as someone (un)known, but rather as someone who is identified as such in figurative and face-to-face encounters. These encounters take place in the present, while simultaneously (re)opening past experiences with other strangers. Thus, the previous sections have offered an examination of instances where *Autumn*’s European protagonist crosses paths with Britons who attempt to define him on the basis of stereotypes that perpetuate the ontological characterisation of the stranger. Ahmed’s observations regarding processes that turn strangers into objects or fetishes have allowed me to demonstrate how one of *Autumn*’s protagonists challenges this type of representation. The literary analysis has revealed that the character with European roots turns the narrative into a space that welcomes all kinds of subjectivities, and which is based on the transmission of moral values and lessons among the different people residing in the UK.

By examining the interpersonal bonds that emerge between the characters of Daniel and Elisabeth, I have argued that their peculiar friendship is able to transcend two of the greatest obstacles that hinder an understanding in the

political context at hand: generational and cultural differences. That being said, the wisdom that Daniel shares cannot be solely pinned to a migrant perspective, as it provides insights that foster the acquisition of a relational point of view, based on empathy, a sense of communitarianism and critical thinking. Far from having an unstable and fuzzy identity, Daniel meets his own definition (or singularity) not in opposition to others, but in the solidary acts and traits that every person has the potential to develop. Therefore, all the characters reap the rewards of having reached a consciousness level that takes into account other people’s circumstances.

This article has shown how political discourses —past and current— give the native characters the authority to define themselves as subjects in encounters with the European protagonist. An analysis of the explicit, temporal and symbolic use of nature has served to accentuate the text’s ability to resonate with a variety of individual and collective circumstances beyond Brexit. This is best seen in relation to Daniel’s contemplative disposition. This is particularly relevant regarding his own agency, as the use of nature metaphors and imagery helps him articulate his fluid identity while dodging any negative characterisations linked to migrancy. Simultaneously, the centrality of natural elements in the forming of his intersubjective bond with Elisabeth —which then translate into the relationship between her and Wendy— or in his use of intertextual references, illustrates the possibility for connectivity between intersubjective, geographical and historical scales.

201

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202

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