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As one of the most influential political events in 21st-century Europe, Brexit was not merely a political, economic and administrative event but also a cultural phenomenon. In the context of this historical backdrop, Ali Smith's Autumn (2016) emerged as the first literary work to directly engage with the issue of Brexit, garnering significant critical and public attention upon its publication. Significantly, this study reveals that the "intergenerational desire" in Autumn is not expressed through direct character interactions but rather is mediated through a reconfigured temporality constructed via natural imagery, particularly that of the "thing"- "tree". Furthermore, the novel exposes the social fragmentation and relational complexities resulting from the Brexit referendum, revealing that while it ostensibly addresses ethnic tensions, its deeper critique centers on issues of class identity. Focusing on the arboreal motif, this paper examines how the novel articulates the intellectual woman-Elisabeth's distinctive vision of social order through three interrelated dimensions - intergenerational desire, the politics of time, and ethnic discourse - thereby proposing potential pathways for reimagining post-Brexit British society.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the most consequential political events in 21st-century Europe, "Brexit is not only political, economic and administrative: perhaps most significantly it is an event in culture, too" ([13] Eaglestone, 2018: 1). Within this historical context, *Autumn* (2016) ([34] Wally, 2018), the first British novel to directly engage with Brexit, garnered widespread attention upon its publication. The narrative primarily revolves around Elisabeth Demand, an intellectual woman of the 21st century, and her emotionally charged bond with a significantly older man. In existing scholarship, the relationship between Elisabeth and Daniel Gluck has often been reductively interpreted as mere friendship ([11] Culea and Andreia, 2022), thereby overlooking Elisabeth's latent "intergenerational desire." Only Vanessa Joosen has noted the implicit intergenerational desire in the text, yet without further interrogating its underlying motivations ([21] 2023). Building on this lacuna, the present study reveals that the "intergenerational desire" of Elisabeth, the intellectual protagonist in *Autumn*, is not merely articulated through direct interpersonal interactions but is subtly embedded and manifested through a reconfigured temporality constructed via natural things - "trees".

Regarding temporality, scholars have noted that Ali Smith deliberately subverts conventional causal-temporal logic in the narrative structure of Autumn (2016), a stylistic approach that becomes particularly prominent in her *Seasonal Quartet* series. As the inaugural work of this series, *Autumn* not only disrupts the conventional sequence of seasonal cycles but also enhances its distinctive literary value through deliberate temporal destabilization (Cowtan, 175). This unconventional temporal architecture mirrors Elisabeth's process of intellectual self-reflection ([12] Currie, 2010). By invoking arboreal imagery - trees and leaves - as mnemonic conduits for recollecting Daniel, Elisabeth uncovers a contemplative resonance embedded within disordered temporality ([1] Adam, 2022 68). From

the foregoing discussions, This study further argues that author Ali Smith's interpretation of time and her idiosyncratic treatment of memory epitomize the intellectual female subject's endeavor to reconcile self-integration with a pursuit of social order. Through fragmented chronology, character Elisabeth not only reconstructs the shards of personal memory but also demonstrates how individuals in contemporary society navigate complex socio-historical contingencies to forge inner balance and harmony.

Furthermore, *Autumn* critically examines the social fragmentation and racial segregation in the Brexit context, delving into the alienation experienced by its characters and the systemic exclusion faced by marginalized groups ([16] Fırat 2021). This novel exposes the societal divisions during the Brexit era and critiques the resulting cultural rifts and polarization ([32]Tomasz, 2021), offering a nuanced portrayal of post-referendum social disintegration and the complexities of interpersonal relationships ([34] Wally, 2017). However, it is noteworthy that existing scholarship on Brexit's societal impact has predominantly focused on racial and cultural dimensions, often neglecting a systematic analysis of the attendant social anxieties and their underlying class dynamics. This critical gap is precisely where Professor Liang Xiaohui's research posits that *Autumn* not only addresses racial issues but also challenges reductionist racist readings of its engagement with migration, arguing instead that the novel more profoundly reflects Britain's entrenched class contradictions. Building on this insight, the present study contends that while the novel ostensibly centers on ethnic tensions, its core critique is directed at the problematics of class identity.

Expanding this framework, the current study analyzes the novel's arboreal motif—termed the "Brexit Tree" - through its three constitutive dimensions: the tree of desire, the tree of time, and the tree of ethnicity. Through the tripartite framework of intergenerational desire, the politics of temporality and ethnic discourse, this investigation elucidates how these arboreal manifestations articulate the intellectual woman protagonist's distinctive vision of social order. Furthermore, it posits that such imaginative constructs offer potential pathways for reconfiguring post-Brexit British society.

1.1 The Tree of Desire: White-Painted Leaves and Platonic Intergenerational Desire

At the heart of the novel lies the prolonged interaction between Elisabeth and Daniel, through which latent generational desires are subtly articulated. Ali Smith's *Autumn* centers on the emotional relationship between Elisabeth, a 32-year-old intellectually inclined female university lecturer and her centenarian neighbor, Daniel. Through Elisabeth's recollections during Daniel's illness, the narrative weaves together fragments of their shared experiences over time, probing the intricate interconnections among art, memory, and socio-historical transformation. As Van Eecke and Wesseling observe, "Intergenerational desire is often folded into texts in a covert way that requires a 'queered' reading to tease out the subtext." ([15]2017: 124). In a specific dream sequence in *Autumn*, the image of white-painted leaves functions not merely as a visual motif but also as a profound symbolic representation of Elisabeth's complex and repressed desire for her elderly neighbor, Daniel.

> The house's windows look out on to high privet hedge. Elisabeth goes outside to paint that high hedge white too. Inside, sitting on a white-painted old couch, the stuffing coming out of it also stiff with white emulsion, Daniel laughs at what she's doing. He laughs silently but like a child with his feet in his hands as she paints one tiny green leaf white after another.· He catches her eye. He winks. That does it. They're both standing in pure clean white space ([29] Smith 2016: 38).

According to Freudian psychoanalytic theory, dreams serve as a privileged access point to the unconscious ([17]Freud, 1980), where repressed desires - particularly sexual ones - are manifested through mechanisms such as symbolism and displacement. Within this framework, the "green little leaves" symbolize life, nature and latent sexuality, while the color "white" is conventionally associated with purity, repression, and even death

([18] Freud, 1905). The act of "white-painted," therefore, can be interpreted as Elisabeth's attempt to conceal or purify her forbidden desire for Daniel, aligning it with socially acceptable norms - especially given the culturally taboo nature of a young woman harboring sexual feelings toward an older man.

Further analysis reveals that Daniel's "laughs silently" - a gesture that oscillates between mockery and tacit approval - suggests Elisabeth's unconscious yearning for his recognition, a desire that remains unspoken in waking life. As Lacan posits, "lack is the cause of desire"([24] *Écrits*, 1966), and it is precisely this sense of absence that sustains Elisabeth's longing for Daniel. The act of "white-painted" thus emerges as a symbolic gesture: Elisabeth attempts to overlay the green of desire with the white of perceived innocence and asexuality.

Within the broader socio-cultural context, women are often expected to suppress what are deemed "impure" desires, a notion further elaborated by Kristeva's theory of abjection ([23]Kristeva, 1982). In this light, the act of whitewashing becomes a ritual of purification - a means through which Elisabeth endeavors to erase her transgressive attraction to an aging male figure. However, just as the "stuffing coming out of it also stiff with white emulsion" reveals the sofa's underlying structure despite being painted over, Elisabeth's desire cannot be fully concealed. Finally, Daniel's posture—holding his feet like a child - is simultaneously innocent and sexually suggestive, mirroring Elisabeth's internal conflict and ambivalence, and ultimately exposing the irrepressible tension between societal expectation and inner desire. And the symbol of white-painted leaves indeed encapsulates multifaceted layers of desire, ranging from Freudian repression to Lacanian lack, and further extends to the societal devaluation of female desire as articulated by Kristeva. Delving deeper into the novel reveals nuanced clues about the attachment between Elisabeth and Daniel. Their bond is constructed through shared interests in activities such as reading, storytelling, music and art, indicating a profound connection that transcends typical relationships.

Furthermore, Elisabeth frequently engages in imagined scenarios involving Daniel, smiling to herself while simultaneously experiencing profound ambivalence regarding her emotional state. "So this is what sleeping with Daniel is like." ([29] Smith, 2016: 205). This narrative vividly elucidates the complexity of Elisabeth's psychological landscape and her authentic affective responses toward her relationship with Daniel. Her fantasies extend beyond mere spatial imaginings, serving rather as exploratory manifestations of the profound emotional bond between them. Of particular significance is the observation that despite Daniel's current bedridden and persistently comatose condition, Elisabeth maintains regular visits, demonstrating the remarkable resilience of their connection in the face of deteriorating health. The intensity of this relationship is such that nursing staff have mistaken them for blood relatives, thereby underscoring the depth of Elisabeth's attachment. "Are you next of kin?" ([29] Smith, 2016: 34) inquired a nurse during Elisabeth's initial visit to the care facility. While no biological kinship exists between them, their interpersonal dynamic mirrors the intimacy characteristic of familial bonds.

Notably, even as Daniel lies bedridden and comatose, Elisabeth continues to visit him frequently, signifying an unwavering connection that remains undiminished by his condition. This close association leads nursing staff to mistake their relationship for one of kinship, highlighting the depth of Elisabeth's affection for Daniel. When asked if she is a close relative by a nurse ([29]Smith 2016: 34), the absence of blood ties does not negate the familial intimacy they share. Through these details, Smith portrays a relationship defined not by conventional categories but by a profound emotional and psychological intimacy that defies easy categorization. Through this narrative depiction, it becomes evident that Elisabeth's affective orientation toward Daniel transcends conventional friendship or reverence, instead encompassing profound emotional dependency and personal yearning. These recurrent fantasies serve to unveil the inherent relational complexity

and unarticulated intimacy characterizing their bond. Moreover, they poignantly demonstrate Elisabeth's psychological ambivalence and ongoing existential negotiation when confronting this socially non-normative attachment.

Beyond that, Elisabeth's mother encouraged her eight-year-old daughter to complete a school assignment by offering *Beauty and the Beast* as a reward.

Tell you what. If you make it up and it's convincing enough to persuade Miss Simmonds that it's true, I'll buy you that Beauty and the Beast thing. ([29] Smith 2016: 46)

This detail not only lends a fairy-tale quality to Elisabeth and Daniel's first meeting but also foreshadows the unconventional nature of their future relationship. The initial meeting between Elisabeth and Daniel alludes to the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast*, which introduces themes of transformation, hidden affection, and the subversion of social expectations regarding age and appearance. This reference provides a symbolic framework for interpreting their unconventional relationship, foreshadowing the emotional depth and psychological tensions that develop throughout the novel. In popular discourse, the phrase is often used to describe couples with significant age differences, such as Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones, signaling both disparity and emotional depth that defies social norms.

Through this metaphor, Smith captures the complex emotional bond between Elisabeth and Daniel. An older man's attraction to Elisabeth is not incidental but reflects a broader thematic concern: the novel employs a non-linear structure to explore female desire within intergenerational relationships through suggestion and concealment. Despite their generational and social differences, both characters seek self-transcendence-Daniel through cultural memory, and Elisabeth through contemporary insight - creating a mutual exchange that mitigates the anxieties of class and temporal displacement.

1.2 The Tree of Time: Temporal Disorder and Temporal Anxiety

In *Autumn*, the recurring things of trees and leaves enrich the narrative's visual layers and symbolize time's passage and life's cycles. These natural elements provide an intrinsic temporal framework that enables the intellectual female protagonist to redefine her perception of time, thereby alleviating societal anxieties stemming from Brexit. Within the text's material and social constructs, trees encapsulate the protagonist's socio-temporal experiences, reflecting the uncertainties and collective anxieties of post-Brexit society.

Though in a coma, Daniel retains vivid memories of his past, particularly his youth and interactions with his sister. Both he and Elisabeth turn to memory as a source of solace in times of distress, highlighting the role of recollection in coping with personal and societal upheaval.

> He is trying to be nice. She is ignoring him. The nicer he is, the more she despises him. This being despised by her is new. Last year and all 183 the years before it he was her hero. Last year she still liked it when he told the jokes, made the coins vanish. This year she rolls her eyes. The city, old as it is, is also somehow new and strange. Nothing's different, but everything is. It's scented by the same old trees. It is summer-jovial. But this year its joviality is a kind of open threat. ([29] Smith 2016: 183-184)

In this plot, trees function as both material entities and sensory mediators through their scent. The pervasive description of "the smell of trees in the air" transforms natural elements into carriers of social and emotional meaning. Scent's spatial diffusion makes it an effective medium for conveying collective affect. Its biological and chemical components can temporarily soothe the nervous system, enabling an embodied interaction between humans and the environment ([9]Coole and Frost, 2010: 9).This olfactory presence shapes the affective atmosphere of the narrative, mirroring how Brexit discourse permeates British society. The sense of a thrill that felt like threat reflects the material manifestation of political

anxiety - where once-pleasurable scents become infused with unease.

Moreover, the novel opens with Daniel entering the woods naked, fully immersed in nature. This scene introduces the theme of bodily and sensory entanglement with the environment, which resonates throughout the text.

> There's a little copse of trees. He slips into the copse. Perfect, the ground in the shade, carpeted with leaves, the fallen leaves under his (handsome, young) feet are dry and firm, and on the lower branches of the trees too a wealth of leaves still bright green, and look, the hair on his body is dark black again all up his arms, and from his chest down to the groin where it's thick, ah, not just the hair, everything is thickening, look. ([29] Smith 2016: 7)

"In every living being, there is a register that records time" ([26] Henri Bergson quoted in Marder 2013, 112). Trees exemplify this idea through their trunks, which expand over time and preserve the past in their annual rings. In an interview, Ali Smith similarly remarks that trees are "made of time" (Anderson 4). This ecological temporality contrasts sharply with modern conceptions of time. As Jones and Cloke observe, contemporary time structures—measured by mechanical devices such as clocks—detach human society from natural rhythms, symbolizing cultural domination over nature ([8]2002:222). Such anthropocentric and aggressive approaches to time are deeply implicated in the environmental crises of the present age. Birgit Spengler further notes that the conceptualization of time and space underpinning the anthropocentric worldview is central to current political orders, enabling the exploitative economies of Western modernit. Therefore, trees embody this alternative, ecological sense of time, evoking more environmentally conscious modes of living and organizing society while challenging the illusion of human exceptionalism. Although Smith disrupts the cyclical temporality of trees to reflect on the environmental and political degradation of contemporary Britain, her narrative also gestures toward a form of temporal entanglement that resists anthropocentrism.

Notably, the human perspective in the text is largely stripped of conventional anthropocentric traits. This dehumanized gaze invites readers into a primordial natural world. When Daniel enters the woods naked, his human presence becomes almost imperceptible. The narrative's description - "He slips into the copse. Perfect," suggesting not only the agency of the forest as an actant, but also establishing a bidirectional sensory exchange between human and nonhuman matter through tactile details such as "feet are dry and firm." This narrative strategy challenges the tendency in traditional ecocriticism to otherize nature, enacting instead the "material entanglement" advocated by material ecocriticism ([19] Iovino and Oppermann, 2014). This plot can be found that Daniel fully merges with the natural environment without hierarchical distinction. Human and plant encounter one another without interference; neither dominates the gaze. This mutual indifference evokes a pre-rational, unfamiliar state before the emergence of human reason. Smith draws a parallel between human physiological change and the vegetal growth of trees "heavy with green leaves." This comparison destabilizes the presumed uniqueness of the civilized human body and, through the phrase "not just the hair, everything is thickening, look," conjures a biopolitical imagination of a pre-modern continuum of matter ([3] Bennett, 2010). Lying in his hospital bed, Daniel seems trapped like a figure encased in the trunk of a Scots pine, unable to awaken - a metaphor that powerfully encapsulates the tension between embodied time and the suspended temporality of modern life.

Additionally, Trees are widely recognized as symbols of the life cycle, mirroring human experiences of birth, growth, maturity, and death. Religious texts such as *Genesis* and the *Quran* frequently liken human development to plant growth ([6] Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996: 1049–62), reinforcing the symbolic and spiritual significance of trees across cultures. In Ali Smith's *Autumn*, this symbolism is reflected in the recurring presence of trees and leaves alongside the comatose Daniel.

But now? The old man (Daniel) opens his eyes to find he can't open his eyes. He seems to be shut inside something remarkably like the trunk of a Scots pine. At least, it smells like a pine. He's got no real way of telling. He can't move. There's not much room for movement inside a tree. His mouth and eyes are resined shut. There are worse tastes to have in a mouth ·though, truth be told, and the trunks of Scots pines do tend to be narrow. Straight and tall, because this is the kind of tree good for telegraph poles, for the props that pit builders used in the days when industry relied on people working in pits and pits relied on pitprops to hold the ceilings of the tunnels up safely over their heads. ([29] Smith 2016: 89)

These natural elements do not merely serve as setting, but function as narrative motifs that echo themes of life, decay, and renewal. By associating Daniel's suspended state with arboreal imagery, Smith underscores the continuity between human existence and natural cycles, while engaging with deep-rooted cultural and religious metaphors that frame life through the lens of vegetal growth. The scene in which Daniel is trapped inside a Scots pine offers a materialist literary representation that exposes the historical trauma and identity anxieties of post-Brexit Britain. Within this passage, the European Scots pine transforms from a living organism into an industrial commodity - used as telegraph poles and mine timber - before ultimately engulfing the human body, thus enacting a form of post-industrial material irony. This complete cycle constructs a self-contained material allegory: the pine, once instrumentalized by humans for its "straight and tall" physical properties, reacquires agency and imprisons the human subject within its trunk, illustrating a retaliatory mode of object domination.

Daniel's immobilization through tree resin, along with his sensory subjugation to the pine's materiality ("smelling like pine," "mouth glued shut"), reverses the conventional subject-object hierarchy. Here, the human becomes subordinate to the object, echoing Marx's theory of alienation in industrial modernity, where human-made systems turn into autonomous forces that dominate their creators. The pine transcends its natural state to become a "hyperobject" ([4] Brown, 2001), imbued with historical memory and political agency. Its material presence embodies multiple temporalities: biological life cycles and capitalist modes of production. The mine imagery evokes suppressed labor histories, particularly resonating with the defeat of the 1984–85 UK miners' strike, and reflects broader processes of British modernization. The resin-sealed eyelids metaphorize "Brexit blindness" - a condition of political myopia - and recall the spatial memory of deindustrialization and class trauma in "left-behind Britain." The allusion to the closure of the Orgreave coking plant in 1985 further historicizes this loss. Meanwhile, the distant view afforded by the telegraph pole symbolizes the visual regime of contemporary surveillance capitalism. Daniel's paradoxical position- immobile yet forced to look far ahead - mirrors post-Brexit Britain's struggle between the aspirational rhetoric of "Global Britain" (UK Government, 2017) and its socio-political constraints. This material narrative also traces a cyclical temporality of industrial decline: the 1980s mine closures resonate with the 2016 steel tariff crisis, positioning Daniel (a post-war baby boomer) and Elisabeth (a millennial) as embodiments of intergenerational material memory.

Smith's material writing exceeds mere metaphor, actively engaging in the cultural politics of redefining "Britishness" in the post-Brexit era. Through the pine motif, she not only depicts individual bodily entrapment but also articulates the collective trauma of national post-industrial transformation, offering a nuanced literary lens through which to understand contemporary social divisions in the UK. Moreover, her narrative subtly critiques the logic of "usefulness" under capitalism. The romanticized portrayal of trees as "messengers between people" after being felled reveals the instrumentalization of life value under capitalist paradigms. This logic resurfaces in Brexit discourse: whether in the call to "Take Back Control" or in the nostalgic desire for industrial revival in "Left Behind Britain," both rely on the reclamation of material heritage to stabilize identity, yet ultimately fall into deeper material entrapments.

The tree in *Autumn* carries dual symbolic weight: it represents not only Daniel's personal dilemma but also encapsulates the socio-political uncertainties and collective anxieties of post-Brexit Britain. The natural imagery reflects how individuals, amid profound social transformations, seek psychological stability through deep emotional connections and memory. At the same time, it reveals the symbolic resonance of Daniel and Elisabeth's intergenerational relationship within this complex historical and cultural context.

What's more, The novel challenges conventional, clock-based temporality in the scene where Daniel throws his watch into the river during a walk with Elisabeth along the riverside.

> She does remember, though, the day they were walking along the canal bank when she was small and Daniel took his watch off his wrist and threw it into the water ([29] Smith 2016: 76)

Drawing on Heidegger's philosophy in *Being and Time*, time is not merely an objective, measurable entity (i.e., "clock time"), but is fundamentally intertwined with human existence. By rejecting clock time, Daniel resists the dominance of modern temporal norms and the technological rationality that governs contemporary life. This act may be interpreted as an attempt to return to a more authentic mode of temporality-one grounded in individual being, future possibilities, and the awareness of mortality. In discarding the watch, he moves away from the condition of everydaynes toward a more genuine state of existence, one that foregrounds his being-toward-death and openness to future potential.

As a paradigmatic commodity of modern society, the watch transcends its utilitarian function to become a symbolic carrier of identity, class, and temporal discipline (Baudrillard, 1998). Daniel's act of discarding the watch constitutes a rejection of its roles as both a mechanism of social normalization and a marker of conspicuous consumption ([33] Veblen, 1899). Instead, he reconfigures it as a medium of private affect, thereby challenging the instrumental logic of consumer culture and enacting a form of anti-consumerist resistance.The discarded watch does not vanish; rather, it persists more forcefully in Elisabeth's memory, becoming a material link between past and present, from the perspective of Bill Brown's *Thing Theory* (2001),. Through Daniel's act, the object is removed from circulation, effectively achieving de-commodification ([2] Appadurai, 1986) and acquiring new cultural significance - as a politically charged artifact imbued with symbolic resistance.

Ultimately, Daniel's gesture functions as a literary intervention against the dominant temporal narratives of the Brexit process. After the 2016 referendum, British society was marked by a collective anxiety structured around imposed deadlines and linear, instrumentalized conceptions of time-hallmarks of modern disciplinary power. Through Daniel's deliberate abandonment of the timepiece, Smith not only deconstructs this oppressive temporal regime but also offers an alternative: a fragmented, fluid, and resistant mode of time perception that resists political instrumentalization and reclaims time as a space of possibility.

Notably, The wristwatch-as a paradigmatic product of industrial modernity-undergoes a strategic subversion of its symbolic meaning. Historically, British horology, particularly its association with Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and the precision engineering tradition exemplified by figures such as David Rooney and James Nye (2020), has long rendered the timepiece more than a utilitarian object; it has functioned as a marker of national technological prowess and cultural superiority ([13]Edgerton, 1996). Within the context of Brexit, such material symbols have been reappropriated by nationalist discourse to support the myth of a globally influential, post-imperial Britain. Daniel's act of discarding his watch thus carries dual deconstructive force: it negates both the object's original functional purpose and its symbolic role as an emblem of national identity ([2] Appadurai, 1986). This literary reconfiguration of material culture exposes the constructed and fragile nature of "Britishness" within contemporary political

rhetoric. Through the abandonment of a quintessential symbol of "Made in Britain," Smith demystifies the nostalgic sentiments embedded in Brexit ideology. While pro-Brexit narratives attempt to fix historical memory through tangible artifacts like coins and stamps, Daniel's gesture functions as a private ritual of symbolic destruction - one that challenges official constructions of collective memory ([22] Kopytoff, 1986: 72) and reveals the hybrid, contested nature of postcolonial British identity.

Moreover, the relationship between Elisabeth and Daniel extends beyond the personal, reflecting broader modes of affective and intellectual support in times of social upheaval. Elisabeth, a young British-born intellectual facing precarity in both employment and economic stability, turns to Daniel for guidance and emotional sustenance. As a European immigrant with deep historical knowledge and cultural capital, Daniel offers her a critical historical lens through which to interpret and navigate the uncertainties of post-Brexit Britain. Their intergenerational and cross-cultural bond thus becomes a model of resistance against the isolating effects of neoliberalism and nationalism.

In this light, what might appear as a minor narrative detail—the throwing away of a watch—acquires profound political resonance. It serves not only as a literary counterpoint to the linear, deadline-driven temporality of Brexit politics but also as a symbolic dismantling of the material foundations of nationalism. Ultimately, Smith's portrayal of this moment constitutes a deeper interrogation of identity formation in the post-crisis era—one that resists essentialist definitions of belonging and foregrounds the necessity of intersubjective, historically informed, and materially grounded modes of solidarity.

1.3 The Tree of Ethnicity: Ethnocultural Concerns and Class Identity Dilemmas

Elisabeth's attempt to transcend established social relational norms reflects both her pursuit of individual agency and a deeper critique of the socio-political order. This study examines her trajectory through the dual dimensions of ethnicity and race. While existing scholarship on *Autumn* has predominantly focused on racial and migratory themes ([34] Wally 2017; [1] Adam 2018), such emphasis has often overshadowed the underlying class dynamics at play. In reality, post-Brexit Britain has witnessed the emergence of a new social figure - one that inhabits the margins of intersecting identity categories and challenges conventional frameworks of belonging.

This study further reveals that, in reality, Elisabeth's class position as an intellectual woman exemplifies the structural contradictions characteristic of neoliberal knowledge labor. She exemplifies the structural contradiction of neoliberal knowledge labor: she possesses cultural capital (art historical expertise) but lacks economic stability (precarious temporary employment). Her engagement with issues of ethnicity and migration functions as a displacement of her unresolved class anxieties. As Žižek (1989) argues, individuals often evade systemic contradictions by identifying with an idealized "sublime object" that masks deeper social antagonisms. The novel's juxtaposition of the Scots pine with the opening of the Scottish Parliament illustrates this ideological mechanism.

> "The Scots pine doesn't need much soil depth, is remarkably good at long life, a tree that can last for many centuries" and she also talks about "the opening of the Scottish Parliament [...] Her mother who has seen it several times already herself, was in tears from the start" ([29] Smith, 2016:90; 197).

This scene constructs a constellation of materially and historically charged symbols whose meanings must be interpreted within the political ecology of post-Brexit Britain. The Scots pine functions not merely as a botanical entity but as a "hyperobject" ([4] Brown, 2001) - its material properties (cold resistance, longevity, ability to thrive in shallow soil) structurally align with narratives of Scottish historical resilience. In parallel, the 1999 reconvening of the Scottish Parliament, symbolized through the mother's tears, emerges as a materialization of political autonomy imbued with affective and intergenerational memory.

The pine's biological trait of not requiring deep soil metaphorically maps onto Scotland's adaptive survival within the Westminster system, while the mother of Elisabeth's repeated emotional response to the parliamentary opening underscores the unfinished nature of devolution. Under the shadow of the 2016 Brexit referendum, this symbolic configuration is reactivated: the pine's bright red seed capsules—a variation of the earlier poppy imagery—evokes the violent emergence of nationalist sentiment, while the parliamentary building itself becomes a stage for power struggles emblematic of a post-democratic order. By juxtaposing natural and political objects—the Scots pine and the Parliament—Smith deconstructs the monolithic narrative of Britishness. Here, matter is not passive backdrop but an active participant in the enactment and witnessing of historical violence ([3] Bennett, 2010). Furthermore, the pine's endurance under adverse conditions serves as a metaphor for the tenacity of marginalized and working-class subjects who, despite limited resources, persist and endure—thereby linking natural resilience to socio-political survival. For example, Daniel, with his likely background as a migrant or refugee from continental Europe (potentially Southern or Eastern Europe), and Elisabeth, an economically precarious intellectual, both embody the resilience of the Scots pine—persisting in conditions of material scarcity and social uncertainty. Notably, Daniel, as a postcolonial migrant, assumes the role of a cultural capital provider, reversing the traditional colonial narrative in which knowledge and culture flow unidirectionally from the metropole to the periphery. This inversion reflects the broader erosion of cultural hegemony in post-Brexit Britain and signals a reconfiguration of epistemic authority within a shifting geopolitical landscape.

Through the juxtaposition of natural and political things—the Scots pine and the Scottish Parliament - Smith not only deconstructs the monolithic construct of Britishness, but also foregrounds the agency of matter as both witness and participant in historical violence ([3] Bennett, 2010). Simultaneously, the novel interrogates the violent emergence of nationalist sentiment and its structural manifestations in contemporary society. However, *Autumn*'s exploration of identity, power, and belonging extends beyond the framework of ethnicity and nationhood. Beneath the surface of migration discourse lies a deeper socio-political dimension that warrants critical examination.

Beyond that, in the scene where characters are depicted "checking and sending passport forms" at the post office ([29] Smith, 2016: 15), individuals directly confront the pressures and challenges associated with migration. This moment reveals how immigration policies function as mechanisms of exclusion, exposing migrants to institutional barriers and social marginalization. Furthermore, it illuminates the intersections between migration, precarity, and class stratification within contemporary British society. Such representations underscore the necessity of examining migration not merely through the lens of national identity, but as a deeply embedded socio-economic phenomenon shaped by global inequalities.

> The man is looking at her filled-in form. Is your surname really Demand? he says. Uh huh; Elisabeth says. I mean yes. A name you live up to, he says. As we've already ascertained. Uh, Elisabeth says. Only joking, the man says. His shoulders go up and down. And you're sure you've spelt your Christian name correctly? he says. Yes, Elisabeth says. 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. Mine is with an s, Elisabeth says. Fancy way, the man says. It's my name, Elisabeth says. It's people from other countries that spell it like that, generally, isn't it? the man says. He flicks through the outdated passport. But this does say you're UK, he says. I am, Elisabeth says. Same spelling in here, the s and all, he says. Amazingly, Elisabeth says. Don't be sarky, the man says. Now he's comparing the photograph inside the old passport with the new sheet of booth shots Elisabeth has brought with her. ([29] Smith 2016: 21-22).

The scene in which a post office employee repeatedly questions Elisabeth's surname "Demand"—"And you're sure you've spelt your Christian name correctly?"—and critiques her spelling of "Elisabeth" as deviating from what he claims is the "normal" (i.e., Elisabeth with a 'z')—reveals how seemingly trivial linguistic norms function as instruments of ideological regulation. The employee's invocation of normal spelling does not reflect a linguistic fact, as both "Elisabeth" and "Elisabeth" are historically attested variants; rather, it exemplifies a socially constructed norm that serves to enforce a monolithic conception of British identity. This moment underscores that material thing such as "passport" do not guarantee social legitimacy independently, but must conform to cultural expectations embedded within bureaucratic systems.

Intriguingly, The pun on "demanding" further illustrates how power operates through language to negate subjectivity: the surname "Demand" is linguistically twisted into an accusation—either excessive entitlement or unworthiness. As Professor Liang notes, this reflects a subtle class-based disdain for those perceived as less educated. Yet, the encounter between an educated woman and a lower-status official within a state-administered setting reveals deeper class tensions masked by performative political correctness. Such dynamics align with Burrell and Hopkins' observation that Brexit discourse often employs reductive binaries that obscure the complex intersections of race, class, and migration ([5]2019:5). Elisabeth herself, however, remains largely unaware of these underlying class conflicts, in part due to the ambiguity of her own class positioning. Raised by her single mother Wendy Demand in modest economic circumstances, Elisabeth occupies a precarious position in the labor market as a gig worker—a condition characteristic of the precarious intellectuals ([30] Standing, 2011: 59), a growing class of highly educated individuals facing insecure employment, limited benefits, and unstable livelihoods. She possesses cultural capital but lacks economic security, placing her in a liminal space between traditional working- and middle-class categories. Her insistence—It's with an s—constitutes a disruption of the unidirectional performativity of naming practices. By persistently asserting her preferred spelling, she transforms her name into an act of counter-performativity, challenging the state's monopolistic authority over identity definition. This scene encapsulates the pervasive identity anxieties of post-Brexit Britain, where disciplinary power operates through micro-political mechanisms embedded in everyday administrative procedures. The seemingly minor difference between "s" and "z" exposes the fictive coherence of "Britishness", revealing a fissure through which cultural hegemony may be destabilized.

Moreover, the passport functions not merely as a personal document but as a materialization of state sovereignty and border logic. Drawing on thing theory, the passport is more than paper—it is a politically charged thing that determines who is recognized as a legitimate citizen. Within the post office setting, it becomes both a record and a tool of interrogation, enabling the employee to question Elisabeth's national belonging. The line, "But this does say you're UK," exemplifies the object's dual nature: simultaneously proof of citizenship and pretext for exclusion. This duality mirrors broader patterns in post-Brexit literature, wherein racialized narratives are frequently mobilized to obscure latent class antagonisms ([26] Liang; [10] Craig, 2017). Ultimately, each query—"Is your surname really Demand?"—functions as a mechanism of biopolitical surveillance, compelling the subject to authenticate their place within the nation. While superficially framed as verification of legal status, these interactions subtly prompt Elisabeth to confront her ambiguous class identity. As a native-born, precariously employed intellectual, her experience epitomizes the downward mobility of the neoliberal knowledge class—educated yet vulnerable, culturally empowered yet economically disenfranchised. In this way, the post office scene emerges as a condensed site of resistance, exposing the entanglement of language, bureaucracy and power in the production of subjectivity under late capitalism.

II. CONCLUSION

As a literary response to the significant historical event of Brexit, this study identifies that Ali Smith's *Autumn* constructs a multi-dimensional discursive framework through its distinctive "arboreal" mode of thinking, offering a novel cognitive lens through which to understand the socio-political order in the post-Brexit era. By systematically analyzing three thematic dimensions—the tree of desire, the tree of time, and the tree of ethnicity—this paper elucidates how the intellectual female protagonist, Elisabeth, navigates social fragmentation through intergenerational desire, temporal reconfiguration, and ethnic discourse.

Firstly, in the dimension of intergenerational desire, the figure of the tree transcends its conventional function as a metaphor, serving instead as an affective "bond" that connects different generations. The relationship between Elisabeth and Daniel is symbolically articulated through imagery associated with leaves, wherein this cross-generational emotional connection not only challenges normative social conventions but also presents a potentiality for transcending generational divides. As Jusslin points out, such "intergenerational desire" is subtly embedded within the text, requiring specific reading strategies to decode its latent significations.

Secondly, in the dimension of temporal politics, the novel subverts the linear and homogenized modern conception of time through the cyclical life patterns of trees and the imagery of seasonal change. Daniel's symbolic act of abandoning his wristwatch not only resonates with Heidegger's philosophical reflections on "authentic time," but also constitutes a literary resistance to the collective temporal anxiety prevalent in British society during the Brexit period. The tree, as an emblem of cyclical temporality, offers a framework for the reintegration of fragmented social memory, thereby challenging dominant historical narratives shaped by modernist temporality.

Finally, in the dimension of national discourse, the motif of the tree of ethnicity subtly incorporates the issue of the Northern Irish border into the broader discussion of Brexit. By foregrounding the local specificity of plant life, the novel underscores the fluidity and complexity of identity formation, moving beyond reductive binaries of ethnic opposition.

Ultimately, *Autumn* articulates a vision of order grounded in ecological thinking: just as trees are rooted in the earth yet reach toward the sky, individuals must simultaneously uphold cultural belonging while embracing openness and inclusivity. This arboreal mode of thought not only opens up possibilities for symbolic healing in post-Brexit Britain, but also offers significant literary insights into how societies globally might navigate populist surges and cultural fragmentation. In an age marked by uncertainty, Smith's literary imagination suggests that authentic order is not found in rigid uniformity, but rather in the dynamic interdependence of difference—much like the self-regulating resilience of a forest ecosystem.

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