

Brexit in a Literary Way: The Post-Brexit Novel *Autumn* by Ali Smith

Author:

Elisabeth, the protagonist of Ali Smith's post-Brexit novel *Autumn*, returns to her home town due to the illness of her former neighbour Daniel, 101 years old, who was her best friend and a kind of teacher and father figure when she was a child. He taught her to see the world in a special kind of way, and thanks to him, she became a literature teacher. Elisabeth and Daniel have not seen each other for years. Now he is „deeply asleep and dreaming“; Elisabeth pays regular visits to him, and their reminiscences allow Smith to revisit events of past decades. Although the main plot is about Elisabeth's and Daniel's relationship, memories and flashbacks, 'Brexit' looms large in the novel. *Autumn* describes the atmosphere, feelings and opinions prevalent directly after the referendum. Concerning the vote, opinions are divided:

Speaker 1 (female)

„All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt theyd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. (...) All across the country, people felt history at their shoulders. All across the country, people felt history meant nothing. (...) All across the country, the country split in pieces.“

Author:

Autumn also shows how newspapers and the media can influence their listeners and readers and even disseminate downright lies. People feel betrayed and angry about being treated like that, not being able to change the situation. Thus, Elisabeth's mother states:

Speaker 1 (female)

“I'm tired of the news. I'm tired of the way it makes things spectacular that aren't, and deals so simplistically with what's truly appalling. (...) I'm tired of how we're doing nothing to stop it. I'm tired of how we're encouraging it. (...) I'm tired of liars.

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann
Podcast Contribution, Author: Laura Zahn
Novel: Ali Smith: *Autumn*. Lodon, Hamish Hamilton 2016.

I'm tired of sanctified liars. I'm tired of how those liars have let this happen. I'm tired of having to wonder whether they did it out of stupidity or did it on purpose. I'm tired of lying governments. I'm tired of people not caring whether they're being lied to anymore."

Author:

Ali Smith knows how to draw the reader into the story, the protagonists' lives and thoughts. The narrative moves back and forth in time, often humorous, and the action is interspersed with the characters' stream of consciousness, their thoughts, memories and dreams. Seeking to come to terms with the present, Elisabeth and Daniel revisit the politics and culture of past decades. One resonant event is the 1963 Profumo affair, a political scandal about a high-ranking politician's sexual exploits that produced a tissue of lies which affected social and political relations, just like the advocates of Brexit used lies in 2016 to build their case for the 'Leave' vote. As the distinguished writer and critic Marina Warner writes about Smith's literary achievement:

Speaker 2 (female)

"Ali Smith (...) is a writer who skilfully moves between voices and modes and genres while keeping a picture of the whole story she is telling, and the rich aural fabric of her narratives reminds me of the composers, John Cage and Steve Reich, who listen in to the soundscape of the world out there and carry it home until it becomes, for us, for their audience, a universe inside our minds."

Author:

If time is the complex and fleeting symphony that *Autumn* presents, the question might be whether an event like Brexit really matters in the long run. Smith's answer is, as expressed in an interview shortly after the novel was published, that maybe it does not matter so much to be inside or outside the EU, but it does matter when a lie goes viral:

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Speaker 3 (female)

“We were dealing with a kind of mass culture of lies. And it’s a question of what happens culturally when something is built on a lie.”