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Time and Transformation: Lacanian Insights in Ali Smith's *Autumn*

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Abstract: Ali Smith's *Autumn*, the first of her Seasonal Quartet of novels, examines temporality and processes of transformation, as well as Britain's post-Brexit political transformation. This article examines the novel using the ideas of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis, specifically Lacan's concepts of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, to elucidate Smith's exploration of subjectivity, memory, and processes of subject formation. *Autumn* interweaves individual experience with contemporary political conditions and disrupts temporal linearity. This technique demonstrates Lacan's idea of *nachträglichkeit*, or how our pasts are always being retroactively reinterpreted in relation to the present. The novel's fragmented structure creates a sense of temporal dislocation, thereby demonstrating the destabilisation of the Symbolic Order, the framework through which meaning is structured, in post-Brexit Britain, where collective and individual identities are destabilised. Lacan's thoughts on how societies change are useful in seeing Brexit as a breaking of the Symbolic Order, and in understanding the disturbing effect of the Real. Elizabeth's life and her connection to Daniel in *Autumn* illustrate the fluidity of identity, the inevitability of transformation, and the difficulty of maintaining coherent subjectivity in a world that's been broken.

Keywords: Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Temporal Dislocation, Identity Transformation, Post-Brexit Britain, Symbolic Order and the Real.

Introduction

Ali Smith's *Autumn* is the first book in her highly praised Seasonal Quartet, and it offers a compelling representation of Britain's socio-political climate as well as its cultural condition following Brexit. Published in 2016, *Autumn* captures the anxiety, division and instability of the UK at that turbulent time. It extends beyond immediate political events. Smith thoughtfully explores the nature of temporality, and this is achieved through the integration of individual experiences with the larger political story, and by moving between the past and the present in a way that is as changeable as the seasons themselves.

The narrative centres on Elisabeth Demand, a thirty-two-year-old art history teacher, and Daniel Gluck, a hundred-year-old man who has greatly affected her since childhood. Through their relationship, Smith explores complex concepts of memory, identity, and the transformative effects of experience. Elisabeth is struggling with the possibility of unemployment, her local area crumbling, and her disillusionment with politics, so she is experiencing significant socio-economic and psychological instability in today's world. However, she has memories of Daniel and their talks about art, books, and a wide range of cultural and intellectual topics and, in a context marked by socio-political fragmentation, these memories function as a stabilising mechanism, providing a sense of purpose and resilience.

Smith's writing in *Autumn* has a lyrical and stylistically refined narrative mode, and the non-chronological storytelling mirrors the non-linear functioning of time and memory. The book shifts between eras and perspectives smoothly, mixing the past and present, living and dying, reality and what is imagined. This sense of time folding into itself illustrates the characters' interiority and their efforts to construct meaning within their lives, with all the personal and global troubles they face.

Lacanian Analysis of Time and Transformation

Jacques Lacan, a major twentieth-century psychoanalyst, developed a theoretical framework for understanding the human psyche, one that focuses on language, the unconscious, and the symbolic systems that structure the subject's perception of reality. His ideas of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary offer critical insights into the novel's engagement with temporality and transformation. And this theoretical model provides a useful framework for understanding the novel's thematic concerns and the characters' psychic and affective states.

According to Lacan, the novel *Autumn* occupies the complex realm of the Symbolic Order, which refers to language, social norms, and culture. At the same time, it is also in part about the destructive arrival of the Real;

that is the parts of life which resist symbolic coverage or definition. Each of the novels addresses an encounter with the Real, which is to say the political contestation of Brexit, the passage of time, and human mortality. They show us how the Symbolic Order denies us any stable, foreclosing or lasting meaning.

Lacan's view isn't that time just flows from one event to the next. Instead, he assigns meaning to things after they have already occurred. And because of that, Lacan's understanding of time works nicely with the narrative of *Autumn*, which isn't told in a simple linear way; it's more about memories, identity, and what makes us, us. The people in *Autumn* aren't just watching time go by; they are constantly looking back at and altering their memories, as they see them from where they are now. In this way time and memory affect each other and it is central to the novel's depiction of change for both people as individuals and for society.

This article examines how Lacan's psychoanalysis gives us a better understanding of the ideas of time and change in *Autumn*, and reveals new aspects of what the characters are like inside and the political and social world of the novel. Lacan's theories help us read Smith's work, by showing how *Autumn* holds the complicated parts of modern life, the changing nature of identity, and the fact that everything will ultimately change.

Lacanian Concepts in *Autumn*

Lacanian psychoanalysis offers a very thorough way to look at the complicated connections between how we use language, who we are, and the unconscious mind. Lacan's ideas are also about how language and systems of symbols form us as people and give us a good understanding of the people in Ali Smith's *Autumn* and how the story is put together. In this novel, the three main elements of Lacan's thinking - the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary - are examined through ideas of remembering, changing, and how time isn't fixed, but flows.

The Symbolic Order, Language, and Social Structures

Lacan's notions make the case that people rely on normative social structures, institutional and discursive structures in order to structure meaning and to find where they belong in it. Language plays a central role in this. It mediates subjective experience, which shapes self-perception and how we relate to everyone. But entering into this 'Symbolic Order' incurs a loss of primordial subjectivity. This creates a tension between subjective interiority and the social patterned shapes we are compelled into. Ali Smith's *Autumn* effectively brings this tension to the fore. It highlights that same tension and how languages and social expectation can often foreground how divergent individual subjectivity and social conformity can be.

Bureaucratic Language and Identity

One of Elisabeth's main projects was to become the ideal citizen and possess the ideal qualitative features to accomplish this. The conspicuous narrative choice of the story normalise the process of producing the ideal citizen that is an assumed fact of our existing contemporary society. In the past, Palestinian women typically performed this task, but in this case, the woman was an exception. Elisabeth's ethnocentrism is already evident in the early parts of the story. For instance, "My face does not need any change. "My angular features just fit in beautifully" (Smith 18) was the first major thing she said. The essential contradiction lies in altering your face in order to fit in yet also having it. Elisabeth, at this point, feels the gap between these established symbolic systems and her actual life, and is annoyed by a system that values fitting in over being an individual.

Social Structures and Personal Relationships

As *Autumn* unfolds, the uncaring expectations of society and how things are organized show the conflict between being an individual and the Symbolic Order. Elisabeth's relationship with Daniel Gluck, an older man from the generation before her, is very different from the inflexible world she's dealing with. Elisabeth had thought the rules of how to act were more solid during Daniel's lifetime, yet even he broke the few firm expectations of his own time, and this demonstrates how much time itself changes. Their conversations about art, memories, and time give Elisabeth a feeling of lasting something that goes beyond the Symbolic Order's restrictions.

When Elisabeth thinks about being with Daniel, she says about how he speaks, Nobody spoke like Daniel. Nobody didn't speak like Daniel. (Smith 89) This highlights how Daniel being around offers her a sense of stability against the impersonal standards of the world around her. Daniel's impact on Elisabeth's views is even clearer when he talks about stories and identity:

"And whoever makes up the story makes up the world, Daniel said. So always try to welcome people into the home of your story" (Smith 74).

Daniel wants her to think of who she is in a more creative way, and he does this by asking her to consider how inflexible things were in places like the Post Office

The "Symbolic Order" in *Autumn* isn't just the backdrop for what happens, it is actually changing how the people in the story see things. Elisabeth's life shows us how language and what people are expected to do can actually change what's real, and really drive people apart from each other and themselves - all because the system cares more about you following the rules than being you. Lacan would say that even though the Symbolic Order is

what holds us together as a society, it breaks up our sense of self by forcing us into strict boxes that don't really fit with how changeable and shifting being human is. Through Elisabeth's interactions with these kinds of social arrangements, *Autumn* gets into the complicated business of becoming a person in the world, and shows us how looking for what things mean so often runs into the limits of what we're allowed to say and the customs of the culture.

The Imaginary: Identity, the Mirror Stage, and Visual Representation

Lacan's "Imaginary" is central to the formation of our sense of self and self-perception. It's the area where we first start to rely on images in the construction of the self. Lacan describes this in his "mirror stage" - as illustrated by the infant's recognition of their reflection and, because of that, initiating the formation of subject identity from something they see. But this is a faulty identification, or *méconnaissance* as Lacan called it, because the image is an idealised one; the subject encounters an idealised self-image, and that causes a split between how we feel inside and how we appear to be.

For the characters in *Autumn*, and specifically Elisabeth Demand, the Imaginary is key to building who they are. Daniel Gluck is almost like a mirror for Elisabeth, prompting reflexive self-recognition. This relationship embodies the two sides of the Imaginary: Daniel provides Elisabeth with a link to a more straightforward time in her life, but being around him also forces her to deal with the fragmentation of her self-image. Because Daniel is between being alive and dead, he is at once something from Elisabeth's history and a problem for any solid idea of self she might have.

The Collective Imaginary and Social Identity

Elisabeth herself lives through the societal changes and the feeling of being let down that Brexit has caused:

"Every morning she wakes up feeling cheated of something... the number of people waking up feeling cheated of something all over the country, no matter what they voted"
(Smith 115).

This illustrates widespread affective disillusionment, and as Lacan's 'Imaginary' idea explains, this comes from a basic mistake in how we think of a group as being. Her mother's sadness at the change to the British passport is similar:

"She points to the words European Union at the top of the cover of the passport and makes a sad face" (Smith 114).

This shows a feeling of longing and being confused because symbols of national identity are changing, and this is upsetting established and shared beliefs.

Time and Transformation in *Autumn*

Lacanian Temporality

Regarding time and how things change in *Autumn*, Lacan's ideas about time - specifically 'nachträglichkeit', or how things are structured after they happen - are a good way to understand how time works in the novel. Lacan's idea is that an event only gets its meaning later, after it's occurred, and the novel is structured in a comparable way. Past events are re-examined by what is going on in the present, and the future isn't fixed, it's open to all possibilities.

Elisabeth remembers Daniel throwing his watch into the canal, and this disrupts conventional temporal perception:

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... she remembers knowing that it was a watch, Daniel's watch, not just any old stone or piece of litter, flying through the air. (Smith 51)

Elisabeth thinks about her memories with Daniel, which are in pieces and linked to the present, which is like the multiple layers of time:

She remembers that Daniel had given her the choice, to throw or not to throw. She remembers she chose to throw. She remembers coming home with something amazing to tell her mother. (Smith 51)

Transformation of Characters

For Elisabeth in *Autumn*, subjective transformation is not merely the usual process of maturing, but a complete change in perspective, in worldview and subjectivity. Her story traces her attempt to link her former self to her present self, to locate something with solidity in a world which is collapsing around her. Her relationship with Daniel - he is both what she remembers and the unavoidable truth of dying - is what really pushes her to change, to critically confront her subjectivity and her place in everything.

Using Jacques Lacan's ideas, this change is a move between how we imagine ourselves, how we use systems of understanding, and what is truly, overwhelmingly real. Elisabeth begins by looking for a firm sense of self within those systems of understanding, but she begins to understand how changeable and many-sided 'self' is.

This is both freeing and disturbing, because Lacan thinks you only really understand when you face ‘the Real’ - that which can't be expressed, the shocking, and the loss that is bound to happen.

The Intersection of Time, Transformation, and the Political

Autumn is very much a product of the time it's set in, specifically what happened after the Brexit vote. The book's ideas about time and changing extend beyond individual experience to collective conditions, and show the worry and lack of certainty that were in the air at the time. Lacan's thoughts on how societies change provide a framework for analysing the book's take on all of this.

Lacan said that when societies change, they often have a break in the system of how we understand things, and this applies to the political picture in *Autumn*. The Brexit vote was that break, a point where the ways we'd previously found meaning and defined ourselves were questioned. The way the novel depicts Britain as split and confused connects with Lacan's opinion that changing societies often have to deal with ‘the Real’ - a time of crisis that reveals how unsteady the system of understanding really is.

Conclusion

Ali Smith's *Autumn* articulates time, memory and processes of transformation, and invites critical reflection on how fluid identity is, and how changes inevitably shape what it means to be human. Looking at these themes through Lacanian psychoanalysis, they become part of a detailed look at the mind, where subjectivity is always being remade by desire, memory and how language limits us. Lacan's terms for the ‘Real’, ‘Symbolic’ and ‘Imaginary’ offer a way of understanding how the novel portrays people navigating a world that's fundamentally connected to them, yet also completely a product of wider politics and society. The narrative doesn't progress neatly, and this is because of Lacan's concept of *nachträglichkeit*, or retroactive structuring; we continually revise our understanding of the past in light of present conditions. Elisabeth's recollections of Daniel effectively illustrate this dynamic, showing how past and present are interwoven to reshape both her self-perception and her outlook on the world. This way of experiencing time in the novel is similar to Lacan's understanding of the psyche, where time isn't a linear progression, but a continuous process and our sense of subjectivity is forever changing.

Autumn also examines the challenges in Britain after Brexit as a nation marked by uncertainty. Brexit really showed how quickly people's sense of belonging to a group can fall apart and just how easily our way of making sense of things can be shattered. It was a split that exposed all the stresses already existing in the country. And ultimately, *Autumn* forces us to think about the instability of future-oriented narratives, to understand that change

is necessary for all of us, personally and for the country as a whole, if we're going to manage the problems of the modern world.

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