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## **BrexLit through Gender Lens: A Study of Ali Smith's *Autumn* and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England***

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### **Abstract**

Brexit, Britain's exit from the European Union, has been approached critically from political, economic, social, and cultural points of view, but gender issues in the Brexit discourses are less explored. Brexit discourses have institutionalised masculinity to such an extent that Brexit has been critiqued as a masculinist resurgence. Theresa May's employment as Britain's second female prime minister and her steering of the Brexit deal does not offer any narrative of women empowerment. Underrepresentation of women in the Brexit deal, preference for "Hard Brexit", and naturalisation militarism in Brexit discourses betray Britain's androcentric culture. Social and political realities have been documented in the pages of creative literature down the ages. Brexit has spawned a new sub-genre called BrexLit, which, as state-of-the-nation novels, mirror various socio-political ramifications. Although BrexLit is critiqued from political, economic, and other perspectives, gender issues in Brexit novels are largely overlooked. Taking a cue from two major Brexit novels, namely *Autumn* by Ali Smith and *Middle England* by Jonathan Coe, the article, unveils the toxic, sexist culture of contemporary Britain. The article also analyses how gender issues trigger Euroscepticism and, driven by xenophobia, femonationalists stigmatise certain immigrants.

*Keywords:* women empowerment, BrexLit, Euroscepticism, xenophobia, femonationalism

### **Introduction**

While gender occupies the centre stage of attention both in academic and critical parlance, the gender issue in the Brexit discourses is considered the elephant in the room – a subject which, despite its conspicuous presence, is avoided as a subject of discussion. Analyses of Brexit typically focus on political, economic, social, and cultural

dimensions, but seldom do they engage with gender perspectives. For instance, Goodwin and Heath, while discussing Brexit and the Referendum, have emphasised educational inequality and disadvantageous low skill but made only a passing reference that “who are against equal opportunities for women and homosexuals [were] much more likely to support leave” (qtd. in Dustin et al. 18). Critical Feminist theory surrounding Brexit has primarily addressed the gendered consequences of Brexit, like how Brexit will put women and the LGBTQI+ community into a tried situation. Less has been told about the gendered campaigning on the eve of Brexit. Brexit discourse, through its employment of militarism and centralising the Brexit deal, has institutionalised the dominant masculinity. UKIP leader Nigel Farage’s constant encouragement to see Christopher Nolan’s movie *Dunkirk* and the Daily Telegraph’s urging to British people to imbibe the Dunkirk spirit, as well as their attempt to draw parallels between Brexit and Dunkirk evacuation, may be studied as an attempt to foreground militarism in Brexit discourses. Despite the presence of a significant number of gendered others, women and sexual minorities are offered minuscule visibility both in Brexit campaigns and Brexit deals. UKIP’s poster *Breaking Point’s* veiled threat of sexual violence/ miscegenation may also be noticed. Rightly does, U. Mellstrom terms Brexit as a “masculinist political revival” (Mellstrom 135).

Politically and culturally, Brexit was engineered by males to such an extent that it can be safely attributed to the title of an all-male business. T. Branigan in *The Guardian* and O’Brien in 2017 drew our attention to the fact that only a single woman was appointed to the negotiating team “while most civil servants are female and 11% are from ethnic minorities” (Branigan 2017). The significant figures handling Brexit were all males (Boris Jonson, Nigel Farage, David Cameron, and EL Miliband, to name a few). Even if Brexit paved the way for the second female prime minister for Britain, the rise of Theresa May offers no narrative of women empowerment. Instead, she faced harsh criticism from her conservative colleagues, who labelled her a weak leader. Hozic and True (2017) argue that her ascent serves as a reminder that “women reach positions of leadership at precarious or risky times” (Hozic and True 276). Again, the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture estimated

that “during the campaign, men were afforded 85 percent of press coverage” (qtd. in Dustin et al. 27). Haastrup et al., in their 2016 study, show how women were supposed to vote on emotive issues that particularly interest them. This gendering of the voting tendency of females is a marker of the entrenched patriarchal culture of Britain. Underrepresentation of women in the Brexit process, upholding of maleness in discourses, centralisation of the Brexit deal, preference for Hard Brexit, and naturalisation of military discourse in everyday life with its tacit dominance of maleness evince a highly masculinist culture.

In the British public imaginary, the EU is perceived as a threat not only to its sovereignty but, because of championing and mainstreaming SOGI causes, to its dominant patriarchal structure as well. The EU is considered an LGBTQI+ advocate and a catalyst for change in the Western mindscape. The EU laws are beneficial to fight social, political, economic, and institutional discrimination. Eugenia Caracciolo di Torella, in her book chapter, “The Unintended Consequences of Brexit: The Work-Life Balance”, has analysed how the 1974 Social Action Plan triggered belatedly the provision for some family-friendly measures to create work-life balance. The introduction of maternity leave in 1997 by the Blair Government was one such move. The EU legislation and different cases of CJEU influenced provisions for the leave for fathers, parents, and caregivers. Apart from the breakup of the family due to differences of opinion regarding Brexit and the resultant psychological, social, and financial insecurity, women were the worst victims of austerity measures also. Despite the 2002 Adoption and Children Act (enabling same-sex couples to adopt in England and Wales), Civil Partnership Act 2004 & 2005 (recognising same-sex couples), and Same-sex Marriage Act 2013, the societal attitude towards queers remains highly discriminating. Galop’s submitted data (2016) shows a 147% rise in hate crimes against SOGI minorities between July and September 2016, and Stonewall’s 2017 research claims a 78% increase in such crimes over four years. The sharp upswing in reported incidents of abuse and discrimination against the queer is proof of toxic culture. The EU proved itself a significant catalyst in improving the lived experiences of queer communities; naturally, post-Brexit

Britain outside the jurisdiction of the EU legislation spells danger for the said community.

### **Brexlit**

The interface between literature and politics is a known domain of British literature. Andrew Hadfield remarks, “Political thought is too important to be left to political science and history alone” (Hadfield 111). Epoch-making socio-political events like the Holocaust and Partition have been approached repeatedly in creative literature. Similarly, Britain’s recent withdrawal of its membership from the European Union has spawned a new subgenre, Brexlit. A variety of Condition-of-England novels of the 1840s, these 21st-century Brexit novels address issues like socio-economic inequalities, immigration, neoliberal capitalism, the devolutions, post-2008 economic insecurity, prolonged economic depression, racism, post-truth culture and the row over the question of the continuation of continental EU membership. Robert Eagleston, Professor of Contemporary Literature and Thought at the University of London, has brilliantly resolved the dispute regarding the viability of approaching this global watershed in literature:

Brexit is not only political, economic, and administrative; perhaps most significantly, it is an event in culture, too. Brexit grew from cultural beliefs, real or imaginary, about Europe and the UK; the arguments before, during and after the Referendum were – and are – arguments about culture. (Eaglestone 1)

Literature is a part of culture, and the novel is intimately tied up with the formation of the nation. It has delineated the question of national identity; British novelists have approached this socio-political event imaginatively in the realistic tradition of condition-of-England novels. Kristian Shaw, Senior Lecturer in Contemporary and Postcolonial Literature at the University of Lincoln, says, “BrexLit concerns fiction that either directly responds or imaginatively alludes to Britain’s exit from the EU or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain’s withdrawal” (Shaw 18). Baroness Young of Hornsey, the Chair of the 2017 Man Booker Prize judging panel, expressed her surprise over the prompt and ample response of the writers to Brexit. This genre, a version of twentieth-century dystopian fiction and a variation of

Condition-of-England novels, enhances British novels' engagements with political culture.

From a sprawling catalogue of works, the article concentrates on two major BrexLits: Ali Smith's *Autumn*, the most celebrated and widely acknowledged of Brexit Novels, and *Middle England*, the last work of Jonathan Coe's trilogy. These novels, apart from featuring the spiral rise of frenzied nativist politics and its attendant ills, expose the dominance of a masculinist culture.

### *Autumn*

*Autumn*, the first of the seasonal quartet by the Scottish writer Ali Smith and popularly adjudged as the best of the Brexit novels, champions cosmopolitan friendship over narrow nationalism. Besides the social, political, economic, and cultural ramifications of Brexit, *Autumn* translates the highly male-dominated culture of contemporary Britain. Smith archives these by adopting various means, one being the extended reference to the Profumo Affair/Scandal 63. Smith succinctly alludes to the sore political scandal titled "Profumo Affair" through the protagonist Daniel's ruminations. The author documents Christine Keeler's reluctance to pose nude for the photo shoot by Lewis Morley, her hostile reception in popular culture, her lying, harassment at the hands of the repressive state apparatus, and her helplessness. The Profumo Affair was a major catalyst in establishing the Labour Party in 1964. Setting aside the political issues, Smith delineates the all-pervasive masculinist ambiance that is antagonistic to the survival and progress of women.

Christine Keeler's life narrative is a sad tale of victimisation. In her girlhood, she was sexually abused by her stepfather and his friends. During her term at "Murray's" as a topless girl, she came in contact with the society osteopath Stephen Ward. Her affair with John Profumo, the Secretary of State for War, earned her the bad name of a woman of compromising morals. Media reports on Keeler's simultaneous liaison with a Soviet naval officer, Yevgeny Ivanov, and the possibility of risking national security convicted her. Smith details the moment when Keeler posed for photographer Lewis Morley, who, to promote the film *The Killer Affair*, went for a photoshoot. Smith captures Keeler's unease, reluctance, and helplessness to pose nude. In the narrative collage, Smith documents

how she was humiliated in the courtroom. Smith also archives how Miss Ricardo, a witness in the trial of the Osteopath Stephen Ward, was publicly humiliated when she announced her profession in euphemistic terms and declared that her previous statement to the police was untrue. Rather than testing the veracity of her statement, Smith chooses to catch the toxic ambiance and document the oppressive structure of the RSA, which forced her to lie.

Pauline Boty's painting dared to reverse the game, changed the dynamics of the Profumo Affair, and made Keeler the center of attention. To document the strongly sexist society of 1960s Britain, Smith resorts to archive the life story of Pauline Boty. Smith documents the societal expectations of the then Britain in unambiguous language:

The ideal woman, a kind of faithful slave, who administers without a word of complaint and certainly no payment, who speaks only when spoken to and is a jolly good chap. (Smith 250)

Brought up in a strongly patriarchal family ambiance because of her father's misogynistic outlook, Boty could pursue the subject of her own choice only because of her mother. Boty's mother herself was a victim of domestic violence. Her father deterred her from pursuing her career as an artist. Though she was denied opportunities to flower as an artist, she could muster the courage to give her daughter space to fulfil her dreams. She took Pauline to America and persuaded the paterfamilias to admit Boty to Wimbledon Art School. Smith is realistic in her portrayal of Veronica, Boty's mother, as a frustrated homemaker, a victim of domestic violence, and oppressed by her husband.

To reflect the extent of toxicity against women with artistic talent, Smith quotes from the front page article of *SCENE*, November 1962, on Boty, appreciating her pulchritude, discounting her talent as an artist: "actresses often have tiny brains. Painters often have huge beards. Imagine a brainy actress who is also a painter and also a blonde" (Qtd. in Smith 249). The hallmark of Boty's painting was sexuality, both female and male, bordering on eroticism and critique of androcentrism. Indoctrinated in the feminist ideology of Genet, Beauvoir, and Gertrude, she was a free thinker. She preferred to paint Keeler as a thinker and not as a sex object, as Keeler is represented in

the photos shot by Lewis. A versatile genius, she dared to acknowledge the role of female sexuality as well as love and believed that “love was terribly important. She didn’t mean romantic love. Generalised sort of love. Enjoying oneself was terribly important. Sex could be as varied as being alive could be Varied” (qtd. in Smith 247).

Boty’s world and Elisabeth’s remain the same. The highly derogatory, women-unfriendly societal attitude of the 1960s persists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well. As Elisabeth goes through the interview with Pauline Boty, which was documented in *Vogue* in September 1964, she feels that the British world, regarding women’s liberation, strangely preserves its status quo. Boty voiced: “She has found by experience that she is in a world where female emancipation is a password and not a fact... . Lots of women are intellectually more clever than lots of men. But it’s difficult for men to accept the idea” (qtd. in Smith 153). Elisabeth’s supervisor, confirming Boty’s words, “she is beautiful, therefore she should not be clever” (Smith 153), appreciates her beauty but dismisses her as “... not a painter of anything more than minor interest. She stole everything of any note in her work from Warhol and Blake... There are lots of highly sexualised images throughout Pop art” (Smith 154-5). Elisabeth’s art tutor’s denial of the existence of a noteworthy female British pop artist, by Elisabeth’s art tutor, may be interpreted as an attempt to erase the female British pop tradition. His dismissal of Elisabeth’s venture to write the dissertation on Pauline Boty and the lost female British pop tradition could be translated as an attempt to erase the female voice. Elisabeth could appreciate well that Pauline Boty’s highly original painting is a portrayal of Britain torn by the threats of war and industrialisation, but, over and above all, it is a celebration of femininity.

*Autumn* mourns the dominance of masculinist discourse, which precludes an empathetic, dialogic approach. The extremity of the masculinist, militarist, heteronormative, and racialised Brexit discourses is to be located in the following excerpt:

Rule Britannia, a bunch of thugs had been sing-shouting in the street at the weekend past Elisabeth’s flat. Britannia rules the waves. First, we’ll get the Poles. And then we’ll get the Muslims. Then we’ll get the gyppos, then the gays. You lot are on the run, and we’re coming after you... (Smith 197)

The diatribe is evidence of Euroscepticism incurred on the point of the gender-friendly moves of the EU.

Smith subtly touches on the femonationalists' false attempt to safeguard the interests of the natives, especially the Western women, from the influences of Muslim immigrants. Driven by xenophobic motivations, nationalism often ties up with feminism, as is claimed by Sara S. Farris in her book *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*. The femonationalists try to justify their racist and aporophobic positions by stating that certain immigrants are dangerous for egalitarian Western society. Smith achieves her purpose through the verbal fencing between a Gunman and "a person dressed as tree" (Smith 124). The Gunman is no other than a right-wing nationalist who believes in rooted white ethnic identity. The Gunman's advocacy of defined hereditary background reveals his identity: "This 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" (Smith 125). Reversing the popular discourse of an "other" posing a threat to natives, Smith shows how the Gunman, a metaphor for a right-wing politician, threatens the man in a tree costume. The Gunman shows off his specious concern for the racial others:

I'm a peaceable person, The Man with the gun said. I don't want trouble. That's why I carry this gun. And it is not like I have anything against people like you generally. (Smith 124)

The Gunman takes offence with the costume of the person dressed as a tree. The use of the word costume alludes to the contemporary row over the hijab and burkha, which are Muslim women's outfits. The intention is to demonise a Muslim immigrant. Femonationalists' attempt to save Western women from Muslim men is reflected in the following statement: "But if you got your way you'd be dressing our kids up as trees, dressing our women up as trees. It's got to be nipped in the bud" (Smith 125). The attempt to stigmatise the person is palpable. Smith, however, doesn't reveal the gender identity of the person: "the person dressed as a tree braced him or herself inside the thick cotton" (Smith 125). Smith communicates the threatened existence of the immigrants but at the same time confirms their existence and their ability to serve the country: "but just as the man with the gun is finally about to shoot, the person dressed as a

tree transforms before the Gunman's eyes into a real tree, a giant tree, a magnificent golden ash tree towering high above waving its mesmerising leaves" (Smith 125-6).

As a state-of-the-nation novel, *Autumn* documents how pro-immigrant female political personages were subjected to rape threats and death threats and even murdered all over Europe. A person as influential as Angela Merkel, who was adjudged by Forbes 2019 as "the most powerful woman in the world," is also not spared from sexist attacks like body shaming and demeaning sexualised comments for her pro-immigrant policies. However, the murder of Jo Cox is the worst example of nationalism gone crazy. A Labour member of parliament for Batley and Spen, she was slaughtered in the street in a village named Birstall where she was to hold a constituency clinic., a series of one-to-one meetings that an MP or other political officeholders hold with their constituents regarding local or National matters. In her maiden speech in parliament, she celebrated the ethnic diversity of her constituency. She advocated for the solution to the Syrian civil war with the active help of British military forces. Her nomination of the 'White Helmets' for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016, her call for the lifting of the blockade of the Gaza Strip, and her work with the Tell Mama on "The Geography of Anti-Muslim Hatred" are sufficient to infer her political and ethical stance. A Remainer, she was shot thrice and stabbed several times by a 52-year-old Batley constituent named Thomas Mair, who shouted "death to traitor, freedom for Britain" (quoted in Dorling and Tomlinson 11) and "Britain First." *Autumn* documents this hate crime perpetrated against a gendered political personage:

Someone killed an MP... A man shot her dead and came at her with a knife. Like shooting her wouldn't be enough. But it's old news now. Once, it would have been a year's worth of news. But news right now is like a flock of speeded-up sheep running off the slide of a cliff. (Smith 38)

Smith exhibits her superb craftsmanship in aligning Scandal 63/ Profumo Affair, Pauline Boty's undervaluation as an artist, and Elizabeth's supervisor's dismissal of Elisabeth's attempt to write her dissertation on Pauline Boty as Britain's entrenched gender discriminating-culture. Elisabeth's mother offers the answer to this social malady is offered by choosing a female partner. This same-sex

love relationship with Elisabeth's mother is an answer in defiance of the entrenched heteronormativity. Elisabeth-Daniel's asexual relationship is also a blow to the essential sexual basis of heterosexual love relationships. Along with a new definition of inclusive Englishness, *Autumn* also redefines love.

### *Middle England*

*Middle England*, the third part of Jonathan Coe's trilogy, is a major Brexit novel not just for its documentation of the political confusion, ideological topsy turvydom surrounding Brexit, post-truth politics, the role of media and think tanks, the highly polarised artificially stirred-up divisiveness, the dilemma of the educated intelligentsia regarding Brexit, but the novel registers how Brexit directly changes the lives of the principal characters of the novel. Lorna, the relationship counsellor of Sophie and Ian, says that "many of the couples she was seeing at the moment had mentioned Brexit as a key factor in their growing estrangement" (Coe 326). One of the many reasons for the temporary rupture in Ian-Sophie's relationship is their different affiliation to Brexit; while Sophie is a Remainer, Ian votes for Leave. The political is made personal in marital relationships. Besides affecting heterosexual relationships, *Middle England* shows how, in the context of Brexit, consciousness about different racial and national identities thwarts the possibility of developing female solidarity. Because of her territorial understanding of society, Helena fails to appreciate the Lithuanian-gendered immigrant Grete's friendly gestures. Rather, she obliquely naturalises Grete's humiliation and physical assault.

Apart from these, *Middle England* portrays the toxic androcentric culture of contemporary Britain. Sophie, one of the protagonists, notices how the white natives resent the authoritative directives and expertise of an Asian woman during the speed awareness course. Their feeling of indignant victimhood is aggravated by being lectured by an Asian woman. Sexism aligned with racism is palpable in the white native Derek's speech, "Why should I take lessons from *someone like you?*" (Coe 40, emphasis added). Derek's name-calling to Asian-gendered instructor Naheed as a "sanctimonious bitch" and Coe's passing reference to the murder of Joanna Yeats prove that Britain is not a safe place for women. The conversation between Ian

and Mr. Wilcox on Ian's failed bid for promotion in favour of an Asian-gendered immigrant betrays the noxious, racist, sexist ambience of contemporary Britain. When Mr. Wilcox says that Ian, a native British, had been deprived of an Asian immigrant, Sophie protests for the sake of truth, as her husband Ian's silence betrays his tacit acceptance of the interpretation. The same toxicity is to be found in Mr Wilcox's reference to Ms. Thornsett and Mrs O'Sullivan as 'lezzers', a derogatory nickname for lesbians, purely on the assumption that they share a cabin and are vegetarian.

The mail sent by Ms. Joan Thomsett with the admission of their alternative sexual orientation brings to the fore the plight of such couples even in the second decade of the 21st century. She tells how they have been forced to cover up the reality of their relationship. In her admission, Joan says that "people do seem to be getting rather more tolerant" (Coe 169). The tolerance that she talks about may be due to the EU's gender-friendly legislation. She raises her voice against the essential heteronormativity of the nation: "tolerant... I have always found a peculiar word in this context" (Coe 169). The writer champions this same-sex, live-in relationship over heterosexual, marital relationships. Whereas Mrs. Murphy continues to enjoy the trip after the demise of her husband on that same cruise, Joan could not think of leaving fractured Heather. Their relationship is more "loyal and loving and supportive" (Coe 169).

Like *Autumn, Middle England* too documents the murder of the pro-Remain Labour MP Jo Cox, founder of All-Parliamentary Friends of Syrian groups (APPG). However, whereas *Autumn* does it subtly, *Middle England* goes to the details of documenting the occasion of the attack along with the nature of the attack and the motive behind it. It is shown through Lois, a victim of the Birmingham Pub bombings. Lois's bewilderment, frenzied reaction, and inadvertent delay to visit her father cause another death. Smith wants to highlight the destructiveness of such hooliganism and how it affects women, who are the abject sufferers in this power game. *Middle England* shows how right-wing politicians strategically plan to use public discontent against a gendered political personage who is coercively represented as thwarting the "will of the people." Gail, because of her candid admission of casting her vote in favour of Remain to the chairman of her own constituency and also because she disagreed

with the Government's proposal of setting a particular date for Brexit, is victimised as an enemy of the people, "the Brexit Mutineer". Gail receives abusive emails, threatening her with rewarding the same fate as Jo Cox for this. It reaches such an extent that Gail, "the woman of Steel" (Coe 361), is completely shattered. This cyber sexism takes a heavy toll on the mental health of Gail and her daughter Sarah.

As a state-of-the-nation novel, *Middle England* shows that Britain is going through a backlash phase. It documents how, in the 21st century post-feminist era, girls are not safe even with their family members. Benjamin relates how his daughter Malvina has been abused by his own brother, Paul. Similarly, Sigrid, the director of the Sky Art Documentary, confides to Sophie how she too became a victim of domestic violence, and her socialist husband kicked her in the face for staying out late with one of her girlfriends. It is a pity that twenty-first-century Britain turns a deaf ear to the consideration of a would-be mother's mental health. As Ian and Sophie entertain Helena with a treat on her 76th birthday, Helena finds the opportunity to initiate the discussion of Ian and Sophie inviting a baby in the happy news of Grete's mothering. Ian thinks that since Sophie is off work, it is the perfect time for mothering. Sophie is aghast to hear this from Ian, for she is going through the worst period of her life, as one of her students has lodged a complaint against her for alleged gender discrimination and, as a result of which, she has been suspended temporarily.

## Conclusion

The discussion of the two Brexit novels documents the toxic androcentrism of Brexit Britain. In *Autumn*, the thumping of the Gunman, the hypnotist's claim to have the power of influence, the SA4A man's exhibition of brute force to Elisabeth, the right-wing spokespersons shouting at the female MP and branding her as a bigoted woman demonstrate the shameless proclamation of male power. The discussion on *Middle England* unveils the societal attitude towards queers. It shows how, outside the EU, both British women and gendered migrants suffer. But all is not lost. The incorporation of legislations like same-sex marriage and the gradually tolerant societal ambience towards the queer, as documented in *Middle England*, may be addressed as an influence of the EU. Sohan-Myke same-sex

couple's marriage and their social acceptance translate to the empowerment of the queers. The gendered protagonists Sophie in *Middle England* and Elisabeth in *Autumn* remain the epitomes of new women. Sophie's friendly gestures to Grete, a working-class Lithuanian immigrant, is a step forward in developing class-less female solidarity. In the context of BrexLit, freedom constitutes deliverance from the bondage of the crushing burden of blood, nationality, and religion, and empowerment lies in power to exercise one's choice of dwelling and language. Sophie and Elisabeth, who succeed in living on their own terms, are the only silver lines in the backdrop of bleak, dystopian Britain.

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