

GENDER DIVISIONS IN BREXIT LITERATURE

An Intersectional Analysis of Gender, Power, Class, and Ethnicity in Brexit Literature



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Abstract

This thesis addresses the representation of Brexit in contemporary literature called “Brexitlit” to provide an analysis of how gendered constructs underlie issues of power, class, and ethnicity in contemporary popular Brexit literature. Two novels categorised as Brexitlit will be analysed: Sam Byers’ *Perfidious Albion* (2018) and Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England* (2018). Gendered norms and divisions inherent to power, class, and ethnicity are found in both novels. Both novels engage with issues of polarisation and representation in positions of power in Britain. The people in power in both novels are mostly men and the power these men exude, predominantly in their language, is exclusively of masculine nature. Women and gender minorities (e.g. non-binary, transgender or intersex folks) are underrepresented in positions of power because power is gendered: power is only appreciated as a traditionally masculine quality. Representation regarding class in both novels is problematic as well, as all politicians and men in privileged positions are middle-class or upper-class. These middle-class and upper-class men feel indifferent towards working-class people, who in their turn feel left out and find a scapegoat in peoples of ethnic minorities. Peoples of ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the media and the government. This thesis aims to give a broader view of issues that are presented in contemporary Brexit literature by providing an analysis of the gendered divisions of power, class, and ethnicity. Its findings might help to create an environment where the issue of gender representation in government can be questioned and discussed further. Correct representation of gender in government is imperative for a democracy to be able to work properly, as everyone should be able to be and to feel represented by the government. Not having this representation directly undermines the basis of democracy, as one of its most basic values is equality.

Keywords: Gender, Hegemonic Masculinity, Brexit Literature, Brexit, Power, Populism, Class, Ethnicity, Race, Divisions, Polarisation, Representation, Equality

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Introduction

The vote to remain in or leave the EU, or the Brexit referendum in 2016, was and still is an impactful event in modern British history. Prime Minister David Cameron of the Conservative Party issued a referendum because several members of his party and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) pressured him to do so. On 23 June 2016, 51.9% of voters voted to leave the EU.¹ The process of Brexit did not start at the referendum, however. Dennison and Carl question how many political commentators try to explain the Leave vote as the result of misleading propaganda from the Leave campaign, the protest vote, racism, Eurosceptic press, or general economic malaise. Dennison and Carl do believe those things affected the vote, but that those factors are all too recent. Leading up to the Brexit, there had been years of discontent with the EU already. They found that of all EU states, the UK is the “least well-integrated EU member state.”²

Large divisions in British society can be connected to the bad relationship between the UK and the EU. Goodwin and Heath’s analysis on the results of the referendum show deep social tensions underlie the vote to leave. They explain that the referendum magnifies divisions of class, age, wealth, cultural and social values, and educational opportunities. They found that “groups of voters who have been pushed to the margins of our society, live on low incomes and lack the skills that are required to adapt and prosper amid a post-industrial and global economy, were more likely than others to endorse Brexit,” and that parties like UKIP “had been actively

1. Matthew J. Goodwin and Oliver Heath, “The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-level Analysis of the Result” *The Political Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2016): 325.

2. James Dennison and Noah Carl, “The Ultimate Causes of Brexit: History, Culture, and Geography,” LSE Research Online, July, 18, 2016, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/71492/>

cultivating” these groups of people.³ Corbett makes a similar observation in asserting that the rise of Euroscepticism has gone hand in hand with a global rise in populism. Populist rhetoric focuses on people characterised as “left behind by rapid societal change, associated with political, cultural and economic globalisation processes, of which Europeanization is a part.”⁴

The words polarisation and division have been used much since the Brexit referendum was held in 2016. Duffy et al. write that Political leaders and the media “were quick to say that the outcome had ‘revealed a divided Britain’” and they note that many politicians have stated that there is a need to ‘bring the country back together’.⁵ Duffy et al. discern differences between ‘issue polarisation’ and ‘affective polarisation’. With issue polarisation they mean polarisation revolving around one or more policy issues. Affective polarisation, on the other hand, is when people start to socially segregate themselves and start to distrust people on the other side not minding issues on policies at all. Duffy et al. reviewed the evidence around the Brexit referendum and concluded that the number of people who identify with a political party has dwindled to only 9 per cent of the electorate, while the number who strongly identify with Remain or Leave has risen to 44 per cent.⁶ They also show that people on both the Remain and Leave side of the vote show affective polarisation as they distrust or dislike the people on the

3. Goodwin and Heath, 330.

4. Steve Corbett, “The Social Consequences of Brexit for the UK and Europe: Euroscepticism, Populism, Nationalism, and Societal Division” *The International Journal of Social Quality* 1, no. 6 (2016): 7-8.

5. Bobby Duffy, Kirstie Hewlett, Julian McCrae and John Hall “Divided Britain? Polarisation and fragmentation trends in the UK,” King’s College London, The Policy Institute, Accessed on 2 July 2020, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/divided-britain.pdf>

6. Duffy, 7.

other side, even though they do not “necessarily disagree with their positions on salient issues”.⁷ They have found that especially the issue of immigration (and Brexit) causes affective polarisation.

While it may seem that Brexit has split the country, it becomes clear, as Shaw also observes, that “Brexit did not divide the nation, it merely revealed the inherent divisions within society”.⁸ In his introduction to *Brexit and Literature*, Robert Eaglestone points out that the Brexit event is not only economic but also cultural, in the sense that it is concerned with the cultural and national identity of people in the UK. The term “Brexlit” has been coined as an umbrella term for “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.”⁹ The preface to Eaglestone’s book has Baroness Young of Hornsey stating that literature plays an influential role in “creating emotional and cultural landscapes, and metaphorically poking us all in the ribs and urging us to start thinking critically.”¹⁰ Christine Berberich notes literary production of Brexit Literature “*could* potentially further contribute to the already rampant division in the country”¹¹ when Remain voters read the

7. Duffy, 8.

8. Kristian Shaw, “BrexLit,” in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*. ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), 16.

9. Robert Eaglestone, “Introduction Brexit and Literature,” in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London: Routledge, 2018), 18.

10. Margaret Omolola Young, preface to *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), xviii.

11. Christine Berberich, “Our Country, the Brexit Island: Brexit, Literature and Populist Discourse.” *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* 2, no. 26 (2019): 156.

mostly Remain oriented Brexiters to confirm their assumptions and Leave voters renounce Brexit for contradicting their own opinions.¹² It remains crucial, however, that Brexit is studied and discussed because reading Brexit literature allows people to form their own opinions on political issues like Brexit. Literature can reveal the origins of divides in the country and allows people to engage with these divides. This aids the public debate as people will become more informed and that in turn helps a healthy, modern democracy.

Gender Divisions

Besides divisions of class, age, and education level, there are also large gender divisions in the UK. Understanding the workings of (subconscious) gender constructs and roles in the Brexit debate is important because it might illuminate the (hidden) power structures at work in divisions of power, class, and ethnicity. Unlike the 2016 US Presidential Election, where gender played an essential role in people's votes and academic research on this election, the analysis of gender roles on the Brexit referendum has been less extensive. Marginalised sexual and gender identities have historically been dismissed and their opinions tend to go astray or are absent in political debates. It is necessary to look at societal issues like Brexit through the gender lens as voices of these marginalised groups should be heard for a modern democracy to work properly.

Jane Green and Rosalind Shorrock explain a gender analysis of Brexit has largely been missing because initial research after the vote indicated that “women and men showed no average aggregate-level differences in voting Leave or Remain.”¹³ This is misleading, however, as Green and Shorrock also found gender-based considerations in voting either Leave or

12. Berberich, 156.

13. Jane Green and Rosalind Shorrock, “The Gender Backlash in the Vote for Brexit.” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2019): 1.

Remain. They found that especially older, white, economically disadvantaged men feel like they are discriminated against by the increasing gender equality in the UK. This group feels like they are being left out of the increasingly complex and globalised world, a world where this group's position has changed from being an integral part of the economy and society to being more peripheral.¹⁴ Research on language and Brexit has been conducted by Achilleos-Sarll and Martill who write that discourses of toxic masculinity have dominated the Brexit process. They have found language that can be associated with militarism and discourse surrounding 'deal-making' surrounding the Brexit campaign.¹⁵ Other research on language and Brexit by Gill and Ahmed examined the impact of the immediate aftermath of the referendum where black women and other women of ethnic minority were discriminated against in an "outpouring of racist and Islamophobic attacks and assaults due to a toxic combination of misogyny and xenophobia that appear to find legitimisation in the 'Leave' result."¹⁶

More recent analyses on the vote do prove men and women do have different views on Brexit. Ashcroft found a majority of poorer (and older) people voted to leave the EU. Leave voters are also mostly white (73% of black British voters voted Remain), and Leave voters scorn multiculturalism (81%), social liberalism (80%), and feminism (74%), to name but a few.¹⁷ This

14. Green and Shorrocks, 5.

15. Columba Achilleos-Sarll & Benjamin Martill, "Toxic Masculinity: Militarism, Deal-Making and the Performance of Brexit," in *Gender and Politics: Gender and Queer Perspectives on Brexit*, ed. Dustin M., Ferreira N., and Millns S. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 33.

16. Aisha K. Gill & Nazneen Ahmed, "A New World Order?" in *Gender and Politics: Gender and Queer Perspectives on Brexit*. ed. Dustin M., Ferreira, N., and Millns S. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 46.

17. Lord Ashcroft, "How the United Kingdom Voted on Thursday... and Why - Lord Ashcroft Polls." Lord Ashcroft Polls - The Home of Polling and Political Research from Lord Ashcroft, 2016, <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/>

result shocked a lot of feminists, like Ruth Cain who writes that “we feminists have no doubt suffered from the metropolitan social media bubble effect.”¹⁸ In these bubbles, racist or sexist comments are censured and ignored instead of being interacted with, reinforcing the idea that “we speak for oppressed women; but many underprivileged women see feminists as patronising and harmful.”¹⁹

The previous paragraphs indicate that gender divisions exist in British society and that it is worthwhile for those divisions to be researched further. Research into literature can contribute to the debate Cain and others have sketched because it can be used to gauge societal tensions.²⁰

Research Question

This thesis will combine the study of Brexit literature with the study of gendered constructs, roles and norms to shed a light on how, in Brexit Literature, gender divisions that exist in the UK are represented and described. Two well-received and prominent Brexlit novels will be analysed: Sam Byers’ *Perfidious Albion* (2018) and Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England* (2018). *Middle England* by Jonathan Coe has been described by critics as a “state-of-the-nation novel” that depicts how a family lives through the preamble of the referendum to a post-

18. Ruth Cain, “Post-truth and the ‘metropolitan elite’ feminist: lessons from Brexit.” *Feminists@law* 1, no. 6 (2016): 1.

19. Cain, 1.

20. Many policy areas like discrimination law, employment law, human rights law and migration had previously been covered by European Law, but will now have to be reworked in post-Brexit regulations. This creates opportunities for gender minorities as laws can be reworked to be more inclusive. It has also created the opportunity for Britain’s second-ever female Prime Minister Theresa May to try and get the UK through the intricacies of Brexit.

referendum Britain.²¹ *Perfidious Albion* by Sam Byers has been named a “furiously smart post-Brexit satire” where the fictional town of Edmundsbury deals with the rapidly digitalising world after Brexit times.²² Analysing these novels through the gender lens will give a broader view of Brexit literature and Brexit in general, and creates understanding about the relationship between gender divisions and Brexit politics within the novels. This thesis, then, will analyse the gendered dimensions of power, class, and ethnicity to find out how gender is represented in relation to these themes in the two novels. Therefore, the research question is:

How are gender identities represented in contemporary Brexit literature and what can studying gender divisions related to power, class, and ethnicity in the novels teach us about the existing gender divisions in British society?

Organisation of Chapters

Chapter 1 will explain the theories that are needed to answer the research question. The fundamental concepts of gender theory like gender being a social construct, the sex-gender distinction and gender performativity will be explained. To be able to analyse gender divisions in society, a brief explanation of different types of masculinity in relation to power, politics and populism is provided in this chapter. The notion of class in combination with gender is discussed in the next section to demonstrate how the two terms interact. The concept of ethnicity will be discussed in relation to gender as this concept has had a large role in the Brexit process and in

21. Alex Preston, “Middle England by Jonathan Coe review – Brexit comedy.” *Guardian*, November 25, 2018

22. Justine Jordan, “Perfidious Albion by Sam Byers review – furiously smart post-Brexit satire.” *Guardian*, August 3, 2018

populist discourse, and this concept has gendered elements as well. The two novels will be analysed on gender norms and roles intersecting with the themes of power, class and ethnicity in chapter 2 and 3. The conclusion follows after illustrating that there are gender divisions underlying power, class and ethnicity both in the novels and in society. Advice is issued for further discussion of the subject of gender as the lack of gender representation in the government directly undermines the basis of democracy.

1. Theoretical Framework

This chapter will elucidate the concepts of gender, power, class, and ethnicity and how they intersect to answer the research question of how gender is represented in both novels. Section 1.1 will explain the concept of gender and how gender norms are actively maintained in society. Section 1.2 will discuss power and masculinities, to show that particular constructs of masculinity are still the norm in politics and power, despite the call for equality. Section 1.3 will illustrate the intersection of gender and class. Section 1.4 will describe the intersections of ethnicity and gender theory where the concept of the ‘other’ will be explained.

1.1 The Concepts of Gender Theory

Gender as a Social Construct

One of the progenitors of gender theory is Simone de Beauvoir. In *The Second Sex* (1949), she writes:

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine.”²³

De Beauvoir’s work considers the question: what is a woman? She does not seek to define a woman, but she tries to make the reader question conventional philosophical concepts. She argues that no one questions the way a man thinks, because he is a man and his body “is not

23. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex Vintage Feminism Short Edition* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015), 283.

a particularity, while a woman's body is an 'obstacle' for philosophising."²⁴ Van der Tuin explains that "Binary oppositions are at the core of de Beauvoir's discourse."²⁵ One example of binary oppositions from de Beauvoir's work is the subject versus object distinction. Van der Tuin writes

"Fairy tales, literature, past and present events – they will always position the subject as a token of masculinity, with a host of connotations in its wake: what is active and free, the rational, consciousness, mind, culture, self-determination, responsibility, and being. Conversely, the object, the passive and unfree, the irrational, the unconscious, body, nature, being determined, being unaccountable, and nothingness will time and again signify femininity."²⁶

De Beauvoir points out that women's status as an object, or as a second-class citizen, is not a women's essence, but that this is attributed to the woman. She proves that being feminine or masculine is something that is socially and culturally constructed and that there is no essence to being female or male.

That gender is socially constructed and performed can be proven in multiple ways. The first is that gender constructs can change over time. A famous example of this is that pink used to

24. Céline Leboeuf, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman': The Sex-Gender Distinction and Simone de Beauvoir's Account of Woman: *The Second Sex*" In *Feminist Moments*, ed. K. Smits & S. Bruce, (Zaltbommel: Van Haren Publishing, 2015), 140.

25. Iris van der Tuin, In *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*. ed. R. Buikema, (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis: 2009), 13.

26. van der Tuin, 13.

be a colour that was typical for boys while in recent times it is more typical for girls.²⁷ The second way that demonstrates gender is ‘done’ or constructed is through looking at the gendered character of culture, education, jurisdiction, and work. As an example of this, Jane Pilcher describes how, in criminal justice, gendered stereotypes about women influence the treatment of female versus male offenders. She found that women “are often treated more leniently than men.”²⁸ Besides this, Pilcher shows how gender influences young children in education, how men and women’s work differs, and how inequality influences the presence of women in politics. Thus, she illustrates that gender is something that is actively ‘done’ and gender is present in every facet of society. Biological determinism is the foundation of this construction of gender in society. The difference between sex and gender must be explained to understand what this means.

The Sex-Gender Distinction

In his 1968 book called *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity*, Robert Stoller was the first to distinguish the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ as two separate terms. He attributed the term ‘sex’ to biological factors and he split the term ‘gender’ into two components: gender identities (based on the individual’s internal awareness of belonging to one sex or the other) and gender roles (overt social roles based on the sex of a person that can be seen in society).²⁹ Sex thus belongs to the realm of science, where anatomy,

27. Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2004), 59.

28. Jane Pilcher, *Women in Contemporary Britain*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 138.

29. Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22.

hormones, and chromosomes determine if a person is male or female. Gender is comprised of identity and behaviours that are learned through social expectations of society. Stoller made this distinction because of transsexuals he met in his psychiatric practice and he established that there was a mismatch between their sex and their gender, which he could ‘fix’ through a change of sex through surgery and hormone treatment.³⁰ Feminists were quick to appropriate this terminology, especially Gayle Rubin in her 1975 essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex” in which she used the terminology to battle biological determinism: the view that the place of men and women in society is determined by their biology. She describes the ‘sex/gender system’ as “the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity”.³¹ This has to do with the way men and women are seen economically and will be described further in section 1.3.

Gender Performativity

The previously described sex-gender distinction was later challenged by poststructuralist scholars, most notably Judith Butler in her criticism of how people interpret Simone de Beauvoir’s work. She writes that

“Gender must be understood as a modality of taking on or realizing possibilities, a process of interpreting the body, giving it cultural form. In other words, to be a woman is to become a woman; it is not a matter of acquiescing to a fixed ontological status, in

30. Moi, 21.

31. Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.” In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. R. Reiter, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1977), 159.

which case one could be born a woman, but, rather, an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities.”³²

She argues that the word “becomes” in de Beauvoir’s quote does not only mean that gender is something that is constructed by others, but that gender is “a process of constructing ourselves”. It is both a ‘project’ and a ‘construct’.³³ Butler’s notion of gender performativity is explained in her seminal book *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler argues that “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” and that “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”³⁴ This rejection of gender as an essential human characteristic is needed to subvert traditional gender roles that concern the distribution of power in society. The next section will look at masculinities and populism to show that distribution of power is indeed gendered in society, most notably in European populist parties.

1.2 Gender and Power: Masculinities

The term ‘masculinity’ is a collection of social practices and cultural representations that are associated with being a man. ‘Masculinities’ is used as a plural to establish that there are more representations than one, both historically and culturally, to be ascribed to men. In this section, traditional or stereotypical representations of masculinity will be discussed, as well as the term *hegemonic masculinity* as this is a relevant term when discussing polarisation in society.

32. Judith Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 72 (1986): 43.

33. Butler, 37.

34. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 33.

Traditional or stereotypical masculinity draws its descriptions mostly from the natural sciences, where masculinity is seen as the result of biological factors such as hormones and chromosomes. This essentialism is characteristic of “populist ‘celebratory’ writing” on masculinity according to Pilcher and Whelehan.³⁵ They exemplify this with the research of Robert Bly, who “sees masculinity as being damaged by the conditions of modern society” and tries to heal this through men-only rituals.³⁶ Academic research of the social sciences on masculinity understands the concept of masculinities as a scale of power relations, both among men and between men and women. Juxtaposing essentialism, Social scientists define that masculinity emerges from two things: from the social context in which men live, meaning their positions in institutions, and the already available discourse about gender.³⁷

Connell has developed a ‘gender hierarchy’ based on masculinity in western societies (figure 1).

At the top of this hierarchy is ‘hegemonic masculinity’: the culturally dominant form of masculinity which is about physical toughness and strength, salaried work, and heterosexuality. This level of masculinity is difficult to obtain and is seen as

an ideal. The term ‘phallocentrism’ is connected to hegemonic masculinity. Phallocentrism is the ideology that the penis (or phallus) is the central element in the organisation of power in society.

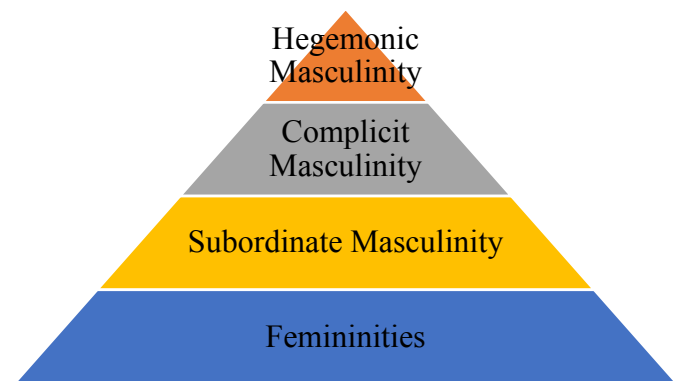


Figure 1: Hierarchy of Masculinity (Connell, 2000)

35. Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2004), 83.

36. Pilcher and Whelehan, 83.

37. Pilcher and Whelehan, 83.

The level below that is ‘complicit masculinity’, where men gain an advantage by trying to achieve hegemonic masculinity. Below this are ‘subordinated masculinities’ to which homosexual masculinity is ascribed and forms of masculinities that do not match “the macho ideals” of hegemonic masculinity. At the bottom of the hierarchy reside femininities.³⁸

When looking at masculinity in relation to power, research has found that representation of women and other gender minorities is still lacking in politics. Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reveals that only 30 per cent of parliamentarians in the UK is female in 2017.³⁹ Research reveals that masculinity operates as an unseen norm in politics because masculinity is the ‘unmarked’ gender category or also known as the gender norm. Löffler, Luyt & Stark illustrate that populist politicians like Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin use images of hegemonic masculinity in their political rhetoric. Löffler et al. define populist as parties that “claim to speak in the name of ‘the people’ against various ‘elites’”.⁴⁰ In Europe, the populist leader is mostly masculine and charismatic, where the persons’ charisma is mostly attributed to masculine terms like ‘strongman’, ‘fighter’, or ‘courage’ and the ability to make difficult decisions.⁴¹ Populist parties in Europe are mostly radical right parties that have immigration as their core issue. These parties, therefore, speak for ‘the people’ as the insiders and ‘the others’ as outsiders, thereby singling out Islamic peoples as the main threat.⁴²

38. Raewyn W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000)

39. OECD, Inequality - Women in politics - OECD Data., n.d.
<https://data.oecd.org/inequality/women-in-politics.htm>

40. Marion Löffler, Russel Luyt, and Kathleen Starck, “Political masculinities and populism,” *NORMA 1*, no. 15, (2020): 1.

41. Löffler et al., 3.

42. Löffler et al., 3.

This analysis of masculinities is meaningful for answering the research question because it shows that masculine qualities are still regarded as the norm in politics and other authorities as well as in society. Populist politicians seem to speak for ‘the people’ and this has to do with class. The next section will look at class and gender to find out how the two terms relate.

1.3 Gender and Class: the Patriarchy and Populism

The concept of ‘patriarchy’ is of importance when looking at class and gender. Feminists have used this concept to refer to the masculine domination of women in society. Theories that use the concept of patriarchy have been split up into two groups called ‘radical feminists’ and ‘Marxist feminists’.⁴³ In radical feminist analysis, patriarchy is the most fundamental social division in society. Millet argues that the institution of the family is one of the means through which men’s oppression is achieved.⁴⁴ Other radical feminists think the female body is the most important oppression mechanism that the patriarchy uses, with which they mean the reproductive capacity of the female body.⁴⁵ Marxist feminists believe that the patriarchy arises from “the workings of the capitalist economic system: it requires, and benefits from, women’s unpaid labour in the home.”⁴⁶ The oppression of women is regarded as a “by-product of capital’s subordination of labour”.⁴⁷ Class inequality underlies gender inequality in this view. Marxists believe that the state maintains power through economic and ideological means. The concept of

43. Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2004), 93.

44. Kate Millett and Rebecca Mead, *Sexual Politics*, (Amsterdam: Adfo Books, 2015), 6.

45. Pilcher and Whelehan, 93.

46. Pilcher and Whelehan, 94.

47. Pilcher and Whelehan, 93.

ideology is a term used in Marxist theory to explain how lower-class workers are living in a distorted reality. When the workers would see things as they are, a class-based revolution could happen that overthrows capitalism. Marxist theory has been central to feminist analysis with regards to equality, for which the concept of ideology works the same.

The introduction already revealed that especially older, white, economically disadvantaged men feel like they are discriminated against by the increasing gender equality in the UK. This group feels like they are being left out of the increasingly complex and globalised world, a world where this group's position has changed from being an integral part of the economy and society to being more peripheral, in other words: an issue of class and gender. As was mentioned earlier, right-wing populism in Europe distinguishes 'the people' and 'the elite' and tries to turn these groups against each other.⁴⁸ To do this, a scapegoat is needed and for European populists that is Islam.⁴⁹ Research by Bulman showed that immediately after the Brexit referendum a great deal of resentment towards ethnic minority groups in the UK was felt as "Racist incidents rose by 23% in the eleven months following the referendum result."⁵⁰ Therefore, a conceptualisation of ethnicity and gender is needed to see where this discontent or this division comes from.

48. Marion Löffler, Russel Luyt, and Kathleen Starck, "Political masculinities and populism," *NORMA 1*, no. 15, (2020): 2.

49. Löffler et al., 3.

50. May Bulman, "Brexit Vote Sees Highest Spike in Religious and Racial Hate Crimes Ever Recorded." *The Independent*, July 7, 2017

1.4 Gender and Ethnicity: the Other

The word *race* entails the idea that humans can be biologically categorised into different groups, most notably because of skin colour. The word or idea was used as a justification of a hierarchical division of humans in dominant (white) and subjected (other) racial groupings. The concept of *ethnicity* is used in this thesis instead of race because the term ethnicity signifies cultural differences, which is more appropriate to conceptualise difference than race is because of the biological connotation this term has.

The concept of ‘the Other’ was used by Simone de Beauvoir, and with this term, she describes women’s status in patriarchal culture; where women are ‘the Other’ and men are ‘the Self’. This means that a woman is being defined in reference to a man. He is essential, the Subject, the Absolute, she is ‘the Other’. Post-colonial theory uses the concept of the Other, where the coloniser is the Self and the colonised is the Other. The central idea of post-colonial theory is to establish that modern society is still infused with the notions of the ‘centre’ of Europe versus the ‘margins’ of the (former) colonies.

Feminist theory uses post-colonial theory to reveal the parallel that women have been ‘colonised’ and marginalised by men, but this view has been criticised because traditional feminism has been too much concerned with white women. Anne McClintock notes, “white women were not the hapless onlookers of empire, but were ambiguously complicit both as colonisers and colonised, privileged and restricted, acted upon acting”⁵¹ However, as Pilcher & Whelehan put it, “The language of borders, margins, and spaces where the post-colonial critic

51. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995), 6.

denies her identity as marginal or encompassed by the mainstream speaks eloquently to the ways in which feminists have articulated female identity and resistance to male power.”⁵²

As was described in section two on masculinities, populist politicians in Europe that are characterised as right-wing harbour immigration as their most salient issue. These parties distinguish not only ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ but also ‘the people’ versus ‘the others’ (ethnic minorities), who supposedly are a threat to ‘the people’. Hartevelde et al. examined the vote for these populist parties and they have found a gender gap where more men are supportive of these parties.⁵³ It is vital to acknowledge this when looking at representations of ethnicity and gender in the novels and the divisions that this causes.

The following two chapters are close reading analyses of the Brexit novels *Middle England* (2018) by Jonathan Coe and *Perfidious Albion* (2018) by Sam Byers. The concepts that are clarified in this chapter will be used to analyse representations of gender in the novel in combination with three themes: power, class, and ethnicity to find out how gender is represented and intersects with each of the themes. The concepts of affective polarisation and issue polarisation that are mentioned in the introduction will be used to show that there are issues of polarisation surrounding the Brexit debate in both novels.

52. Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2004), 103.

53. Eelco Hartevelde, Wouter Van Der Brug, Stefan Dahlberg and Andrej Kokkonen, “The gender gap in populist radical-right voting: examining the demand side in Western and Eastern Europe.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 1-2, no. 49(2015): 103.

2. Gender Divisions in *Middle England* (2018)

“To the privileged, equality feels like a step down. Understand this and you understand a lot of popular politics today.” – Iyad el-Baghdadi, Twitter, 1:36 p.m., 25 July 2016⁵⁴

Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England* is a novel that revolves around a British middle-class family colliding with each other through the Brexit process. It starts with the election of the coalition government between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives in 2010, through to the re-election of a Conservative government that pushes the EU referendum in 2016, ending with the referendum aftermath in 2018. *Middle England* is a sequel to *The Rotter’s Club* (2001) and *The Closed Circle* (2004) and features some of the same characters. Arguably at the core of the novel are Ian and Sophie, a couple that struggles with the implications of the Brexit referendum. Sophie is from a middle-class background and highly educated while Ian is lower-class. Their differences of class and gender almost cause them to end their relationship. Another area of polarisation between the couple is immigration and ethnicity. Ian’s mother Helena is openly racist and this racist behaviour is copied by Ian, driving a wedge between Ian and Sophie’s relationship. Meanwhile, the characters of Benjamin and Doug find that those in power in the novel are mostly Oxbridge alumni who are depicted as being out of touch with reality. Benjamin makes the transition from the privileged position of hating politics and wanting nothing to do with it to realising that being complacent on polarising issues is being part of the problem.

2.1 Gender and Power: Politics of the Privileged

The theme of politics is prominent and explicitly mentioned in *Middle England*. The opening chapter of the book depicts the aftermath of Sheila’s burial in 2010, six years prior to the

54. Jonathan Coe, *Middle England*. (Amsterdam: Penguin Books, 2018), 142.

Brexit referendum. Benjamin describes what he hears on the radio while driving home from the funeral as “the familiar world of gladiatorial combat between interviewer and politician.”⁵⁵

Benjamin’s train of thought here resembles what Achilleos-Sarl and Martill found in the language used by male politicians six years later during the Brexit debates. This illustrates that masculine discourse of militarism and ‘deal-making’⁵⁶ was the dominant discourse six years prior to the referendum in this novel.

Most politically charged conversations happen between Doug and Nigel Ives in the novel. Doug, a school friend of Benjamin’s, is a political journalist and commentator for the *New Statesman* which is a newspaper on the political left side of the spectrum. He connects with Nigel Ives through his network, who is an insider on the Conservative party and they agree to share information. The conversation takes place just after the election in 2010 when the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats decided to form a coalition. Nigel describes how Nick (Nick Clegg) and Dave (David Cameron) behave when they are together and he says “you should hear the bantz between them at the cabinet table”⁵⁷ to which Doug replies critically that people are struggling to cope with the austerity after the 2008 financial crisis, and he is appalled by the fact that the negotiations are being driven by banter. Nigel remarks that this must be a generational divide between them and says that the people voted for “radical indecision – the new spirit of our times”.⁵⁸ The novel sketches a cynical reality to give the reader an exaggerated

55. Coe, 4.

56. Columba Achilleos-Sarl & Benjamin Martill, “Toxic Masculinity: Militarism, Deal-Making and the Performance of Brexit,” in *Gender and Politics: Gender and Queer Perspectives on Brexit*, ed. Dustin M., Ferreira N., and Millns S. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 16.

57. Jonathan Coe, *Middle England*. (Amsterdam: Penguin Books, 2018), 35.

58. Coe, 35.

account of how politicians work behind closed doors. The fact that the politicians in this novel are laughing while many people are struggling after the financial crisis shows the privileged social position of white, upper-class men. This is significant because it proves that politics is gendered and power is situated in masculine identities in Britain. Only 19 MPs in the Conservative party were female in 2010, and of the Liberal Democrats, only 9 MPs were female in 2010.⁵⁹ These data reveal that being a white man is the norm in politics in Britain and this is reflected in the novel.

In a later conversation, Nigel and Doug talk about David Cameron's manifesto which mentions the Brexit referendum for the first time. Doug immediately criticises if this is a good idea, to which Nigel replies "It's Dave's idea. Of course it's good."⁶⁰ When Doug asks for which 'people' the referendum will be held, Nigel reveals that he means "the people in the Conservative Party who keep banging on about how much they hate the EU and won't shut up until we do something about it."⁶¹ When Doug notes that it is risky because "in recent years, the consent of British people has worn wafer-thin", Nigel agrees that it is a gamble but "The fact that Dave's prepared to take it is what makes him such a strong, decisive leader"⁶². This illustrates the masculine language of deal-making that Achilleos-Sarl and Martill found in masculine discourse around Brexit. Nigel even moves to use the discourse of populism next when he and Doug discuss the date of the referendum: 23 June 2016. Nigel says that "people have had enough of intellectuals" when Doug is critical of his plans, mirroring the fake-news sentiments of

59. Amelia Gentleman, "Women in a very male general election." *Guardian*, April 21, 2010.

60. Jonathan Coe, *Middle England*. (Amsterdam: Penguin Books, 2018), 182.

61. Coe, 183.

62. Coe, 184.

populist parties. Nigel comments that journalists love hypothetical questions and says “what happens if we leave the EU? What happens if Donald Trump becomes US president? You live in a fantasy world, you people.”⁶³ This is dramatic irony because the reader knows that Donald Trump did indeed become president and that Brexit did happen, but it shows that the Conservative party had not thought the referendum through because of misplaced confidence of the male leaders. When Doug asks what the Conservative party thinks of Nigel Farage’s party UKIP, Nigel Ives tells Doug that Dave does not talk about Nigel Farage because he and his party are “fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists”⁶⁴ and that the first past the post system keeps these people from having real influence. Doug replies that these people are exactly the people the Conservatives will be giving a voice through the referendum. Nigel is still convinced that this will not happen because “Dave is a *winner*, Doug. He’s a *fighter*”⁶⁵ overestimating once again the power of the privileged male politician.

2.2 Gender and Class: Equality

After the Brexit referendum has happened, Benjamin and Doug talk about the failure of Conservative politicians. Doug connects the dots when he summarizes that the most influential politicians of this time (David Cameron, Michael Gove, Jeremy Hunt, George Osborne) all met each other in Oxford Union in the eighties. Doug laments that these upper-class people have been running the country and seem to use the national stage for their infighting. They agree that their country is “still being run by a bunch of public schoolboys who all cut their teeth at

63. Coe, 265.

64. Coe, 268.

65. Coe, 270.

Oxford”.⁶⁶ The previous section has demonstrated that the political climate in the UK has been defined by masculine politicians and masculine discourse in what could be called a patriarchy: a political space of power where the white ‘strong’ and ‘charismatic’ man rules. That this patriarchy only exists out of upper-class individuals proves that representation in the government is an issue of class.

Other meaningful interactions between gender and class happen between Ian and Sophie. Sophie is an academic of the humanities, so she is highly educated and middle-class. She meets her husband Ian in a driving school because she exceeded the speed limit once. Ian is working-class, and not that well educated. This becomes clear through a game they are playing where they make groups of words with letters on number plates and Sophie says “DDP- Derrida Purposely Prevaricates” and Ian at the same time says “Dead Panda Pongs”.⁶⁷ While their relationship and time in the novel progress, they seem to get more divided because of their class and the ideological differences attached to class. This can be seen in the following quote where, while watching the Olympics, Sophie thinks to herself “Ian was instinctively drawn towards anything to do with sports, so she was instinctively repelled by it.”⁶⁸

Ian shows he struggles with the ideals of hegemonic masculinity because he is anxious about being the provider for the family. When Sophie is offered a permanent lectureship at a London university, he mentions that this would mean “they would have more money: this would certainly be useful – especially if they were going to start a family, as he was anxious to do”.⁶⁹

66. Coe, 339.

67. Coe, 70.

68. Coe, 129.

69. Coe, 146.

While Sophie thinks about taking on the job at university, Ian applied for a promotion himself, and “he was pretty confident of success, and the rise that would go with it.”⁷⁰ Ian wants to be a provider for their family because he feels like he has to adhere to existing gender roles in society. He demonstrates this through his insecurity because he is afraid that their marriage is not going to hold if Sophie were to become the provider: “something about her drifting back towards the city, a way of life and a set of friends that had nothing to do with him (...), posed a threat to their marital status quo.”⁷¹ This illustrates that Ian is holding on to the image of hegemonic masculinity where the man provides for the subordinate woman.

Sophie does not take on the job as a university lecturer, but she decides to go on a cruise where she can earn money by giving guest lectures. Ian is also invited to the cruise. Sophie and Ian are assigned a fixed table while on the cruise and they meet Geoffrey Wilcox. Ian and Geoffrey hit it off immediately because they both are working-class men and share the same values. While still on the cruise, Ian hears that the promotion he was going for at work will be given to his female colleague of colour called Naheed. Geoffrey and Sophie discuss this at the dinner table. Geoffrey says that Ian shouldn’t feel bad about it and “he shouldn’t blame himself”⁷² because “we all know how this country works. People like Ian don’t get a fair crack of the whip anymore.”⁷³ He follows this by saying “we don’t really look after our own anymore do we? If you’re from a minority – fine. Go to the front of the queue. Blacks, Asians, Muslims,

70. Coe, 146.

71. Coe, 146.

72. Coe, 165.

73. Coe, 166.

gays: we can't do enough for them. But a talented bloke like Ian here and it's another story".⁷⁴

Sophie replies by saying "maybe they just gave the job to the better candidate".⁷⁵ The fact that Geoffrey thinks this way about the situation shows discontent in working-class white men about the way equality is implemented. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter says: to the privileged, equality feels like a step down. Ian feels this way as well, as he says at the end of the chapter that Geoffrey "is right"⁷⁶ about his promotion. This is the catalyst of deterioration for Ian's and Sophie's relationship.

Sophie and Ian hit rock bottom when their differences around the Brexit referendum become clear and they decide to try relationship counselling. Sophie describes the way Ian had reacted when they heard Leave had won "with such a gleeful, infantile, triumphalism that she genuinely realised that she no longer understood why her husband felt the way he did."⁷⁷ During counselling, they find out their division and separation are not due to politics, because neither of them mentions politics as the reason their relationship does not work. Ian thinks the cause of their relationship issues has to do with that "she is very naïve, that she lives in a bubble and can't see how other people around her might have a different opinion to hers. And this gives her a certain attitude. An attitude of moral superiority."⁷⁸ This proves that the referendum for them was not about Europe at all, but rather that something much more intricate was going on making resolving their relationship issues much more difficult. Their class difference is a part of that, but

74. Coe, 166.

75. Coe, 166.

76. Coe, 171.

77. Coe, 326.

78. Coe, 327.

also their gender difference. Affective polarisation between the two seems to be underlying this because they disagree on the Brexit issue causing them to disagree on all other issues as well.

The novel comments on political extremes in relation to class: in working-class people who lament that their place in society has been compromised because of gender and ethnic equality in the case of Ian and his friend Geoffrey, and in middle-class people who seem to be viewed as being morally superior over working-class people.

2.3 Gender and Ethnicity: The Immigration Issue

One of the main breaking points of Ian and Sophie's relationship besides class described in the previous section is the way their views differ on ethnicity. Sophie's friend Sohan is a man of Indian descent. Together they attend a lecture in 2010 of a French and an English writer where they discuss that parties like the French Front National will never be popular because of British "love for moderation and tolerance".⁷⁹ Sohan immediately crushes "this so-called tolerance" and demonstrates that he experiences 'othering' daily as he says "every day you come face to face with people who are not tolerant at all, (...) they want to tell you to fuck off back to your own country (...) but they know they can't".⁸⁰

One of these 'people' is depicted in the driving school class that Sophie attends. Next to Sophie in this class sits Derek, who is repeatedly corrected by Naheed, Ian's female co-worker of colour who got the promotion over him. Sophie notes that "her knowledge and experience commanded respect, even though the resentment felt by some of the men at being lectured on this subject by a woman – by an Asian woman – was palpable."⁸¹ Derek whines that Naheed is a

79. Coe, 30.

80. Coe, 30.

81. Coe, 40.

“sanctimonious b-” and that what Sophie and Derek witnessed this afternoon is “the new fascism”.⁸² Sophie’s observation demonstrates that men like Derek find it difficult that a woman of colour lectures them because that attacks their hegemonic masculine ideals. As can be seen in the hierarchy in chapter 1, femininities reside at the bottom of the hierarchy. The novel illustrates that men like Derek have anger issues with a woman of colour who is more powerful than themselves. Naheed comments on this anger that she regularly encounters as “when something makes you angry, at least you are feeling something. You get an emotional kick.”⁸³ This image is in accord with the idea that radical right populism members are mostly white males who are having difficulty with the increasing visibility and power of women of different ethnic backgrounds in the professional sphere in Britain.

The image of the white, heterosexual male being the primary instigator of xenophobia is affirmed throughout the novel but is challenged in Benjamin’s character as well. Benjamin meets up with old school friends for his writing career, Peter being one of them. Peter’s book title is *The Kalergi Plan* which is a reference to a far-right, anti-Semitic, white supremacist conspiracy theory that “the white races of Europe were being subjected to gradual genocide” by “being slowly bred out of existence.”⁸⁴ At this point in the novel, Benjamin feels indifferent to his friend’s statements and he is able to disregard them because of his privileged position. Later on, when discussing an analogy Boris Johnson made between the EU and Nazi Germany, Benjamin asks himself “Was it happening because of the referendum campaign, or had it been

82. Coe, 42.

83. Coe, 44.

84. Coe, 67.

this way all along, and he hadn't been paying attention?"⁸⁵ This is a significant quote because it elucidates that the privileged position of Benjamin (white, highly educated male) has made him oblivious to struggles that ethnic and gender minorities face. Benjamin shows a new level of awareness of the embedded polarising structures in society like class, gender, and power, not just because of the referendum but as existing prior to this political event.

The same level of reflection on one's actions is never achieved by Ian's mother Helena. She arguably is the most racist figure in the novel. She compares Sophie to an English rose, approving of her and Ian's romantic match. She proudly and openly quotes Enoch Powell's speech *Rivers of Blood* when she says "he [Powell] was the only one brave enough to say it".⁸⁶ Ironically, Helena's racism is one of the main reasons why Ian and Sophie are able to work through their relationship issues. In the last section of class, it was mentioned that Ian and Sophie differed in opinions due to their class and gender differences, but also due to their differing perspectives on ethnicity. Ian has been raised with his mother's xenophobia, but he changes his xenophobic opinions through the last chapters of the novel. Ian meets Helena's former caregiver Grete, a woman from Lithuania, in a shop. Grete reveals that while she was pregnant, she had been attacked by a white supremacist who told Grete "We speak English in this country (...) polish bitch."⁸⁷ Helena turns out to have witnessed this attack and she refused to help Grete in the prosecution process of the aggressor as a witness, even though Helena and Grete seemed to have a good working relationship. Her unwillingness to help indicates to Ian that his mother's xenophobic ideology only causes more divisions between people. When Sophie hears this story

85. Coe, 292.

86. Coe, 90.

87. Coe, 381.

and the way Ian behaved in this situation, she decides to make up with Ian and try their relationship again. Ian's and Sophie's differences can be overcome because Ian realises his privileges as a white man and the wrongdoing to ethnic minorities in the case of Grete and the role that he plays in this. Sophie mends her and Ian's relationship because he has proved her that he no longer wants to be associated with his mother. The novel illustrates that some men in the novel, like Ian and Benjamin, realise their privileged positions of power, gender and ethnicity regardless of their class and change their behaviour accordingly to fix their relationships and become more inclusive human beings. Other characters in the novel like Derek and Helena never change and stay angry and xenophobic because they do not realise their disproportionate power or are afraid to lose their power.

3. Gender Divisions in *Perfidious Albion* (2018)

Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* is a novel revolving around the fictional town of Edmundsbury in post-Brexit times. The novel follows a journalist called Robert whose ideas promptly move from the left side of the spectrum to the alt-right side, all because of his hegemonic ideas of masculinity and the position of power he gains. His partner Jess notices this and tries to cope with her emotions of disgust for her partner's change through multiple online personas that she creates to criticise Robert's blogs. Meanwhile, a company called Downton tries to evict the remaining inhabitants of a failed social housing project, including the working-class and xenophobic Darkin and the only working-class character of colour in the novel named Trina. A Nigel Farage-like character called Hugo Bennington is the political leader of a party called 'England Always'. This political party is secretly aligned to extreme right parties and to Downton for campaigning money, all while a multinational tech company called Green exercises great influence on the digital infrastructure of the town.

3.1 Gender and Power: Masculinity and Populism

The character that shows the most development is Robert. Robert is a journalist who writes blogs. He has gained a large twitter following by defending his partner Jess from a character named Ziegler. Ziegler appropriated Jess's research on masculine identity within gaming culture to propagate his own toxic masculinity to the 'bro brigade'. Ziegler writes "the hyper-masculinised and essentially misogynistic culture of online gaming (...) was a perfect example of the way in which super-charged male competition gave rise to a highly productive strain of male co-operation (...) so we should strive towards less equality in the name of greater

productivity.”⁸⁸ Robert defends Jess from an attack of the ‘bro brigade’ and becomes quite popular online because of his ‘feminist’ ideals. Jess realises that she is angry at Ziegler but also at Robert because defending her is the gendered norm. Through her pain, Robert gains more influence and power in feminist circles. Jess is frustrated that she cannot fight against the power of Ziegler herself and disheartened that she needs a man to protect her, revealing that power is mostly connected to masculine individuals in this novel.

Jess’s discontent for Robert grows and she creates the digital characters of Julia Benjamin and Byron Stroud to deal with her anger and to empower herself. Through doing this, she creates large divisions between herself and Robert, because they start to drift further apart with every blog Jess writes as Julia Benjamin. Robert describes that Julia Benjamin causes Robert’s “reputation, talent and manhood” to be dragged through the mud.⁸⁹ To anger Julia, Robert decides to write about the angry working-class man called Darkin who refuses to move out of the failing social housing project to create more sympathy for the white, English man. When Robert notices that the “bro brigade are already all over your [his] piece”⁹⁰ he realises that he has grown similar to the populist politician Hugo Bennington, who is described in the next section. His ideas become even more extreme because his friend Jacques DeCoverly greatly influences him. Jacques DeCoverly is described as a stereotypical, white, upper-class man. Together, they decide to set the ‘bro brigade’, a group of angry white men, onto Julia Benjamin. When they discuss what they think Julia Benjamin really wants, they agree it is “attention”⁹¹ and

88. Sam Byers, *Perfidious Albion*. (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), 57.

89. Byers, 20.

90. Byers, 179.

91. Byers, 229.

“being fucked”⁹² demonstrating that these highly educated upper-class men are extremely misogynistic. Even though Robert realises he has now done the exact same thing to a Julia Benjamin as Ziegler had done to Jess, something that he had protected Jess from in the past, he relishes in the fact that “everyone was talking about him”⁹³ proving that power and influence are more important to him than a happy relationship. Toxic ideals of hegemonic masculinity are heavily represented in groups of men that hold power like Robert and Jacques.

Ironically, Robert and Jacques are avid supporters of Byron Stroud. Byron is another digital character created by Jess, and Byron is an influential ‘man’. It is highly ironic that privileged men like Robert and Jacques look up to the digital persona of Byron while he, in fact, is the woman Jess: the sex both Jacques and Robert seem to despise. Jess’s character of Byron proves that gender is performative because Jess has been able to create an excellent and believable digital male persona. The fact that Jess needs Byron’s character to influence the men in her environment shows a link between power and masculinity, but also that that same masculinity can be performed by a woman. It proves that power is not inherent to the masculine sex, but that power is linked to the masculine gender, as it is only valued in men in society.

A man in the novel who exudes his power through the media is Hugo Bennington. Hugo is a Nigel Farage-like character in this novel, always accompanied by Teddy, his campaign manager. His style of politics is that of populism because his main point of action is fearmongering with the working-class white man. Hugo describes that his own fear of immigrants “has diseased him.”⁹⁴ Teddy is a stereotypical example of hegemonic masculinity

92. Byers, 229.

93. Byers, 241.

94. Byers, 77.

when his physique is described as “an unswerving commitment to the expansion of his glamour muscles. He had a way of flexing his pecs with every motion.”⁹⁵ Hugo not only uses anti-Muslim discourse, but he is also anti-equality when he writes “Is there such a thing as too much equality? [...] for every white Englishman, they employ, they must also hire three foreigners, two women, and at least one homosexual.”⁹⁶ Hugo and Teddy create an atmosphere of affective polarisation that mirrors real society. The fact that the populist politicians in this novel are all men proves a gendered norm of power and patriarchy in society.

Ironically, Hugo’s downfall is caused by women and gender in the novel. Jess, Trina and Deepa decide to conspire together to bring down Hugo through revealing that Hugo has been sending unwanted nude pictures to their friend Kesia (a Polish immigrant, which is ironic because Hugo hates immigrants) and Vivian Ross (an influential interviewer for the BBC, who also successfully grills Hugo in an interview). Hugo tries to defend himself to Teddy, who wants him out of the party, by attacking Vivian Ross: “she was a *cunt* [writer’s emphasis] in that interview (...) and she deserved-” to which Teddy replies “Was the picture an effigy of her detached head impaled on your penis?”⁹⁷ Hugo thinks to himself “It was, in many ways, his ultimate fantasy: his dick writ large, mapped over England’s topography (...) He had gone too public, he had become an attention supernova.”⁹⁸ This proves that the populists in this novel have an extreme relationship with their (hegemonic) masculinity as they believe that sending their unwanted nudes to women is a form of power. In fact, the scene in this novel is literally

95. Byers, 78.

96. Byers, 25.

97. Byers, 315.

98. Byers, 315.

phallocentric: Hugo believes that his phallus gives him the right to have power and that his sex is superior.

It is ironic that the women in the novel use the masculine power norms of phallocentrism for their own power gain. That they have to do this through the character of Byron Stroud and the Griefers, a white male-led organisation that tries to expose the town's digital privacy, proves that they do need masculine power to be heard, because of the gendered masculine power norm in society. If the women had to publicise the unwanted nudes in their own names, the same fate would befall them as that of Vivian Ross who "was forced to close her Twitter account"⁹⁹ because of the men that kept attacking her online, while she is the victim of the unwanted nudes. This situation is reminiscent of criticism on the #metoo movement where women are being 'victim blamed': women have to explain why they were being harassed. Were they wearing provocative clothing, for instance, and did they even fight back?¹⁰⁰ The problem with the way of thinking here is that the harassers are guilty, not the women being harassed. The way that this novel engages with #metoo issues is provocative because Vivian Ross is indeed being attacked while she is the victim. However, Hugo does eventually end up being dismissed from his political party because of the phallic scandal.

3.2 Gender and Class: Fear and Plutocracy

Issues of power are also addressed through divisions of class and gender in the novel. Hugo is revealed to be in league with Downton, the company that wants to build a digitally smart housing unit in place of the social housing unit where working-class characters Darkin and Trina

99. Byers, 340.

100. Maia Szalavitz, "Why we're psychologically hardwired to blame the victim." *Guardian*, February, 27, 2018.

live. Hugo has received money from the Downton company to fund his populist campaign.

Hugo, in turn, is required to make sure the remaining inhabitants of the building leave. He thinks he can achieve this through using his own political agenda of fearmongering and being anti-immigration, as the social housing estate is “an embarrassment, a magnet for all the issues Hugo had been talking about”¹⁰¹.

Things become complicated when Darkin, a fervent supporter of Hugo’s populist rhetoric, turns out to be one of the most stubborn stragglers in the social housing estate. He is a white man and fervent supporter of Hugo’s party ‘England Always’. Darkin is a typical working-class white man. He is openly racist and redirects his anger at foreigners because that is what he is fed in the press, mostly by Hugo Bennington’s opinion pieces. Darkin complains “No-one gives a shit about people like me. That’s the truth. We worked. We paid our taxes.”¹⁰² When Darkin is asked who he thinks will live in the social housing estate instead of him, he says “rich people (...) they are making room for all the foreigners (...) you want to get something in this country? Change your colour.”¹⁰³

As Darkin’s situation gains popularity in the media, from Robert’s blogs and Hugo’s columns mostly, it becomes clear that Hugo is in a predicament. Politically he is supposed to support Darkin while his monetary allegiance is to Downton. Dramatic irony is used here because the reader knows that the real source behind Darkin’s eviction is the large company Downton and Hugo Bennington respectively, not the foreigners Darkin believes. Darkin’s angry character unveils that working-class people are dissatisfied with their lives, and they look for a

101. Sam Byers, *Perfidious Albion*. (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), 106.

102. Byers, 48.

103. Byers, 51.

scapegoat to direct their dissatisfaction at. Populist politicians provide the perfect scapegoat in the form of foreigners while these politicians secretly help the elite to gain more power.

Another person living in the social housing estate is Trina: a working-class character of colour. She works for a high-tech company called Green for whom she developed a micro-task management system that keeps track of what workers from home contribute to the company. These workers at home are motivated through gamification of the system: a system where employees are rewarded the better they are at the job, while they have to hope to become part of the company. The people trying to work at Green are mostly lower-class people who wish to become part of the labour force. The company Green is revealed to hold the most power in the novel as the reader finds out that Green is secretly behind an organisation called the Griefers. The Griefers are a group of masked men that threaten to expose digital information of the people of Edmundsbury. The Griefers are exposed to be just “a bunch of conceptual performance artists we [Green] hired.”¹⁰⁴ Green holds power over both the labour force and people’s digital privacy. Real influence in Britain seems to be held by up-and-coming tech companies like Green, instead of the democratically chosen politicians of a democracy. This view challenges the idea of the traditional class system where the upper-class has the most power because of their money and influence in politics. Real power is held by companies with both money and digital privacy: a new form of Plutocracy.

3.3 Gender and Ethnicity: Racism and Representation

The novel’s engagement with racism, xenophobia, and populist discourse is borne out of Hugo’s hypocrisy. He writes openly racist opinion pieces to the press, while also wanting to be able to enjoy the benefits of multiculturalism. He and ‘England Always’ party executive Alan

104. Byers, 365.

meet for the first time in an Indian restaurant, which in itself is ironic regarding their hatred of immigrants. While they are both drunk, Alan says “fucking niggers”¹⁰⁵ to no one in particular. Hugo, in turn, is “warmed by a rare masculine understanding”¹⁰⁶ and explains that during his time as a columnist, he was asked “many times if he was racist”¹⁰⁷ to which he always replies that he is not, following with a deliberate digression: “the importance of free speech and of democracy”.¹⁰⁸ He would point to “valuable contributions ethnic minorities had made to the country, such as Indian food and Thai massage.”¹⁰⁹ This is all evidence that populists are ‘othering’ peoples from different ethnic backgrounds. Like in *Middle England*, the men in this novel fail to understand the privilege they have compared to minorities of different ethnic backgrounds. While they enjoy multicultural food and other cultural aspects like Thai massage, the people of these ethnic minority groups are discriminated against and portrayed as job stealers and thieves of social housing.

Trina is a vital character regarding gender and ethnicity in the novel as she is the only person of colour in the novel. From early on, she makes clear that she despises privileged boys she is working with. Trina’s main motivator in life is inequality. She says “what kept me going was thinking about those arseholes in there. Because do you think they ever sat up at night asking themselves why they were doing this? No way. They are all here because they just never

105. Byers, 120.

106. Byers. 120.

107. Byers, 120.

108. Byers, 120.

109. Byers, 120.

questioned the fact that they should be there.”¹¹⁰ Trina is aware and vocal about the privileges her white male colleagues have, and she reveals that she is envious of them. An ex-boyfriend of Trina’s got “slap happy”¹¹¹ and she knocked out his teeth when he did it the second time. Because he pressed charges, she got an electronic tag. As an under-class person, the mandatory house arrest allowed her to work as a micro tasker and climb Green’s company ladder.

Trina laments that she is not represented on television. She is “unable to recognise either herself or any element of the world she inhabited in a single one of these shows”¹¹² when she stumbles upon a televised speech of Hugo. She assumes she can tweet safely in her own Twitter bubble about what she has seen from Hugo and she writes “you can’t even make up racist terms of abuse any more. It is political correctness gone mad #whitemalegenocide lol.”¹¹³ Hugo then demonstrates his most hypocritical side. He bombards her with his army of angry white men because he feels threatened by her tweet, while he, of course, does exactly the same thing in his own political columns. Trina receives hate in the form of “grainy photographs: a naked black woman noosed to a tree, her hands tied, her muscles slack.”¹¹⁴ The #whitemalegenocide tweet causes a media storm, but Trina is never asked to comment in the media. The only people heard on the tweet are white male populists like Hugo and also Robert, meaning she is not represented in the media. This lack of representation is an issue of power and gender. Because Trina is a

110. Byers, 114.

111. Byers, 114.

112. Byers, 134.

113. Byers, 137.

114. Byers, 185.

black woman, she is not invited by the press to explain her side of the story, as she is the ‘lowest’ on the hierarchy of power. Trina criticises her white allies and says

“white people always decried injustice when it was safe to do so, and when an audience in the cheap seats could reliably affirm their righteousness. But when injustice was actually occurring, when their intervention was both necessary and fraught with risk, they vanished or turned hostile.”¹¹⁵

Trina’ character elucidates that there are deep ethnic divides in post-referendum Britain. Populist rhetoric is at an all-time high, distracting people’s attention from the real power of large companies and ‘big data’ that is taking over the country. The gendered aspect of power is involved here, as white men, and predominantly privileged men, still have the power in politics and the power to shape political debate.

115. Byers, 273.

4. Conclusion

This thesis has provided an intersectional analysis of the two contemporary Brexit novels *Middle England* (2018) by Jonathan Coe and *Perfidious Albion* (2018) by Sam Byers to establish that there are gendered elements underlying divisions of power, class, and ethnicity in both novels. This conclusion aims to synthesise and compare the two novels to answer the research question, discuss the implications of the results and reflect on possibilities for further research.

Power in *Middle England* is demonstrated to be unevenly distributed along the axes of both gender and class. Political discourse and language are highly gendered to favour white, upper-class men in *Middle England*. Populist rhetoric and masculine terms are used when David Cameron is described as a ‘strong’ leader of ‘the people’, revealing that the gender norm in politics is masculine, as a strong leader is appreciated by society. The Brexit referendum campaign is drenched in masculine language as well. One example from *Middle England* is how David Cameron is described: “Dave is a *winner*, Doug. He’s a *fighter*”¹¹⁶ overestimating the power of the privileged male politician. This patriarchy of privileged men is one of the reasons why there are large divisions of power and class in the UK. Gendered divisions of power are revealed to underlie the Brexit vote.

In the post-Brexit novel *Perfidious Albion*, the relationship between power and gender reveals similarities with *Middle England*. The novel demonstrates that a post-Brexit Britain is governed by populist male politicians and that men are still unequally favoured because of masculine norms of power. Ideas of hegemonic masculinity are heavily present in groups of men that hold power like Robert and Jacques, and in Hugo Bennington. Only masculine power can

116. Jonathan Coe, *Middle England*, (Amsterdam: Penguin Books, 2018), 270.

subvert masculine power structures in *Perfidious Albion*. Jess successfully fabricates a male digital persona that the men in privileged groups seem to adore. This reveals that power is not inherent to the masculine sex, but that power is linked to masculine gendered characteristics, as it is only valued in men in society and it is something that can be performed.

Divisions of class and gender in *Middle England* are mostly found in the relationship between Ian and Sophie. Ian is anxious to be the provider for their family because he feels like he has to adhere to existing gender roles in society where the man provides for the subordinate woman. Ian is unable to fulfil the hegemonic masculine ideal to be the provider of the family because of his class and education difference to Sophie. His insecurity about this is deepened by his working-class friend Geoffrey Wilcox, a man who displays discontent with working-class white men about the way gender and ethnic equality is implemented in society. Ian becomes misogynistic and xenophobic because of his insecurities which creates a rift between the couple. They find out that it is their class and gender differences that underlie their differing votes of Leave and Remain.

The real power to be feared in *Perfidious Albion* is the power of money and class. The character of Darkin, an angry, white, working-class man, reveals that working-class people are dissatisfied with their lives. They have worked hard all their lives but find that they have no degree of social mobility. They look for a scapegoat to direct their anger at and populists provide them with the perfect scapegoat of 'the foreigners'. Secretly, the politicians who provide this scapegoat are in league with the truly powerful classes: big data companies. This challenges the traditional view of the class system where the upper-class is the most influential because of their money and political domination. A new form of Plutocracy is born where both money and digital privacy hold power.

Middle England demonstrates the complex relationship between gender and ethnical divisions. The novel distinguishes between characters who remain xenophobic throughout the novel, like Helena and Derek and characters that change their suppositions, like Ian and Benjamin. Derek's character shows he has difficulty with Naheed, a woman of colour, lecturing him and being in a position of power in the driving school. This image is in accord with the idea that populist acolytes are mostly white males who are having difficulty accepting an increase in visibility and positions of power for women of colour in the professional spheres in Britain. Helena's character shows that there are women who are deeply racist and fear the 'other', showing this fear is not limited to sex or gender in the novel. Benjamin and Ian are characters that come to realise that they are in privileged positions of power because of their gender and ethnicity. They both realise that it was the discourse around the Brexit referendum and its aftermath that made their privilege clear for them, and that it was not the case that the referendum itself caused divisions between them and their families.

Like in *Middle England*, the men in *Perfidious Albion* fail to understand the privilege they have compared to minorities of different ethnic backgrounds. While they 'enjoy' multicultural food and other cultural activities like Thai massage, the people in ethnic minority groups are discriminated against and portrayed as job stealers and thieves of social housing. The only black character in the novel, Trina, is not represented in the press, even though her #whitemalegenocidelol tweet is the main subject of discussion in the media. Media representation is an issue of power and gender. Because Trina is a black woman, she is not invited by the press to explain her side of the story. She is the lowest on the hierarchy of power and her opinions are not regarded as meaningful.

The summarised analysis proves that there are gendered divisions inherent to power, class, and ethnicity in the novels. Both Brexit novels analysed are so-called ‘state-of-the-nation’ novels. This means that they are fiction, but they do describe and interact with issues that mirror reality. The introduction and the theoretical framework of this thesis show that the same issues of polarisation are present in real society. A couple of examples are the rise of populist politics, the discontent of the white working-class and the discrimination of ethnic minorities. These themes are engaged with in both novels and in the previously summarised analysis, the concepts of gender theory are linked to these issues.

The results of this thesis, thus, are that there are issues of power and representation in British politics regarding gender, class and ethnicity. People in power are often men and the power that these men exude, mostly in their language, exclusively is of hegemonic masculine nature. Women and gender minorities are underrepresented in positions of power. Heteronormative couples struggle with the harsh ideals of hegemonic masculinity where the man is the traditional provider for the family. This ideal of masculinity prevents gender equality in society and maintains the patriarchy. Power is connected to traditionally masculine gender norms. Women, therefore, have to appropriate parts of masculine identity to be heard. Some women are able to do this, revealing that power is not biologically determined by a person’s sex.

There are issues of representation in the government regarding class as well. Most politicians are middle-class or upper-class, and most politicians are men. This proves that mainly men are in privileged positions in society. These middle-class and upper-class men do not notice the struggles of the working class. Working-class people, in their turn, feel left out and dissatisfied by their lack of social mobility. They think the culprits of their lack of social mobility are people of ethnic minorities because they are misled by populist politicians. White,

working-class men are the main acolytes of xenophobic populist rhetoric. This group has difficulties with the increasing gender and racial equality, especially in the workspace where they believe their jobs are being stolen. In reality, many jobs are lost because of technological advancements or because of dubious decisions from the men in power. Therefore, a suggestion for further research is to analyse other polarising social categories such as education level. Education level is an influential factor because it allows for social mobility and it allows people to realise that there is still inequality in the world. Education helps people to distinguish fake news which in turn might help to undermine the power of populist politics.

Ethnic representation in government is a problem as well. People from marginalised ethnicities are still seen and portrayed as the 'other'. While white people take for granted that they can get an Indian curry or a Thai massage, they seem to forget that peoples from ethnic minorities have daily struggles with racism and a lack of representation in politics and the media. Especially women of ethnic minorities face heavy inequality in healthcare, education, employment, and politics in comparison to men of colour and also in comparison to white women.

The gender divisions described and analysed in this conclusion have all been present in society before the vote the Brexit referendum. Privileged white, middle-class and upper-class men have had the power in politics to issue the referendum. Through populist politics of fearmongering, the 'other' was singled out as the culprit of everything that was wrong with the EU. White, working-class men feared that too many foreigners were coming into the country and stealing jobs. Moreover, many women of colour were attacked in the referendum's aftermath. These examples show that the influence of gender on issues like Brexit cannot and should not be dismissed.

By providing this analysis of the gendered characteristics of power, class and ethnicity, this thesis has given a broader view of issues that are presented in popular Brexit literature with regards to gender. Its findings might help to create an environment where this issue of gender and ethnic representation in the government can be questioned and discussed further. Inclusive representation of gender and ethnicity in the government is imperative for a democracy to be able to work properly because everyone should feel represented by the government. Not having this representation directly undermines the basis of democracy, as one of its most basic values, is equality.

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