

# Echoes of the Past

Collective Memory, Postcolonial Melancholia and Brexit in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*



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15/06/2024

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Title of document: Echoes of the Past: Collective Memory, Postcolonial Melancholia and  
Brexit in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*

Name of course: BA Thesis English Literature

Date of submission: 15/06/2024

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## Abstract

It has been eight years since the Brexit referendum and the consequences of the outcome have been dictating Britain's political landscape to this day. Since the Referendum, many novels have been written that are considered Brexlit, including Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, which deal with the direct aftermath of Britain's choice to leave the EU. This thesis provides an analysis of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* in relation to British collective memory, national identity, postcolonial melancholia and Brexit. The aim is to establish an understanding of how these notions are represented within the four novels belonging to the *Quartet* and how those concepts might have influenced the outcome of the Brexit Referendum. The outcome of this research will add to the understanding of how certain perceptions of Britain's past came to be and how these perceptions could have played a role in the majority vote for Leave in 2016.

Keywords: Brexit, collective memory, national identity, history, imperialism, postcolonial melancholia, xenophobia, Ali Smith.

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## Introduction

On 23 June 2016 the British population voted to leave the European Union with a 51.9 per cent majority<sup>1</sup>, a decision that will influence the country's future for a long time to come. The Leave campaign, divided between Vote Leave and Leave.EU, focused on posing the EU as a “threat to national sovereignty and drain on the NHS”, as well as immigration.<sup>2</sup> Yet the Euroscepticism started long before the Referendum. Many Britons were reluctant to join the European Economic Community when it was created in 1958 for a fear that it might “undermine British parliamentary democracy” and that outsiders would not understand the importance of the Commonwealth.<sup>3</sup> However, throughout the second half of the 1900s Britain lost most of its Empire and EEC economics started to exceed those of Britain. This forced then-prime minister Harold Macmillan to apply for a membership in 1963, but it was not until 1973, after a third application, that the country was allowed to enter the EEC. Britain's apparent exceptionalism and assumed superiority made other countries reluctant to let them enter.<sup>4</sup> However, 2016 was not the first time Britain held a referendum regarding its EU membership. On 5 June 1975 the country's population voted to stay within the European Community, as it was called at the time, with a 67 per cent majority.<sup>5</sup> Although Britons chose to stay within the EU with this vote, it did give them the feeling that they could leave any time they wanted to.

The Referendum has shown the deep divisions within British society. Goodwin and Heath point out that “communities that tend to be more economically disadvantaged than average, where average levels of education are low and the local population is heavily white”

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<sup>1</sup> 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): 323.

<sup>2</sup> Kristian Shaw, *Brexit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Kristian Shaw, “BrexLit,” in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Shaw, 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Goodwin and Heath, 323.

strongly voted Leave, while areas with a high percentage of people with a high educational qualifications and large population of young people tended to vote Remain.<sup>6</sup> However, Brexit did not just stem from economic and political issues within British society. In his introduction to *Brexit and Literature* (2018), Robert Eaglestone points out that “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; its impact on cultural life of these islands may last for generations.”<sup>7</sup> In this instance culture is synonymous with national identity. Many Britons felt removed from their national identity and wanted something to change. The way they expressed this discontentment is through voting Leave. Yet this national identity that they long for does not have a fixed definition. Eaglestone goes on to explain that “nations are produced in the imagination by concepts, narratives, memories and traditions: that is, through the work of culture.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, national identity is something that is created through the influence of various external factors.

One factor that has an impact on British collective memory and national identity is literature. Kristian Shaw notes that “Literature has always been a significant influence on the perception of Britishness (or a narrower Englishness), shaping the identifiers of national identity in the popular cultural imagination.”<sup>9</sup> Ali Smith does this in her *Seasonal Quartet*, which consists of four novels that cover British society from the time the Brexit referendum took place in 2016 to when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the country in 2020. The *Quartet* consists of the novels *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019) and *Summer* (2020). In a piece for *The Guardian* Smith wrote that “the novel form itself, I tend to think, is ever-evolving, ever-communal, ever-revolutionary, and because of this, ever-hopeful to work with,

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<sup>6</sup> Goodwin and Heath, 325-27.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Eaglestone, introduction to *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Eaglestone, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Shaw, 18.

whatever it formally does. Plus, the form's named for its own newness, and for its relationship with the news, the latest thing. That's why it's called the novel."<sup>10</sup> She deemed the novel the perfect form of popular culture to encapsulate current events happening within British society. Smith let herself be inspired by everything that was happening in the world at present, but also by perceptions of the past that have seeped into the present. In that same piece for *The Guardian* she noted that before writing each novel she would visit the British Library to view handwritten manuscripts by authors like John Keats, William Shakespeare, Katherine Mansfield and Charles Dickens at the V&A.<sup>11</sup> The works of these acclaimed authors have influenced Smith's writing throughout the *Seasonal Quartet*. References to numerous works by Shakespeare and Dickens are a reoccurring theme in all four novels and Smith even makes up a novel about Mansfield in *Spring*.

Although the four novels consist of their own individual stories, they are intertwined through various characters and storylines. Smith writes about how her novels are connected through "Time, art, thought, history, language; who gets to speak and who doesn't; people real and fictional and how their stories are and aren't told; division, loss; protest, activism, resistance; generosity, the story of unexpected and extended family. Human coldness, human warmth, human work. Leaves. Bare branches. Frost. Buds. Leaves again."<sup>12</sup> To gain a better understanding of how these connections throughout the novels reflect British collective memory and national identity, all four will be analysed in terms of the research question: In what way does Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* show how notions like collective memory and postcolonial melancholia are mediated by perceptions of the past and how might this have influenced the outcome of Brexit?

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<sup>10</sup> Ali Smith, "Before Brexit, Grenfell, Covid-19...Ali Smith on writing four novels in four years," *The Guardian*, 1 August, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/01/before-brexit-grenfell-covid-19-ali-smith-on-writing-four-novels-in-four-years>.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, "Before Brexit, Grenfell, Covid-19...Ali Smith on writing four novels in four years."

<sup>12</sup> Smith, "Before Brexit, Grenfell, Covid-19...Ali Smith on writing four novels in four years."

To answer this question, this thesis will start out with a theoretical framework chapter, which start out with section on memory studies. Firstly, an overview of memory studies in general will be given, which will then be followed up by a deeper dive into British collective memory and the influence this has on education in the country. The next section will go into imperialism and the history of the British empire, with a further explanation of how this has led to a feeling of nostalgia for that time. All of these concepts will come together in the section on postcolonial melancholia and xenophobia in the United Kingdom. The next chapter will consist of the analysis of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* with the aforementioned theories in mind. The first section will go into how Smith portrays history and memory within these novels and how perceptions of the past play a role in this. The next section analyses how Smith makes use of intertextuality to address the past and how texts can help understand Britain's current situation. The last section will dive deeper into how Brexit comes to the front within these novels and how postcolonial melancholia has played a role in the outcome of the Referendum. The thesis will end with a conclusion, which is drawn from analyses of the previous chapters and reflects on how this is relevant for future research.

# 1. Theoretical Framework

This chapter will go into theories surrounding national identity and collective memory in order to elucidate these notions further and gain a better understanding of how they relate to the *Seasonal Quartet* and their influence on Brexit. Sub-chapter 1.1 will discuss memory studies and its relation to British collective memory and education. Sub-chapter 1.2 will go into Britain's imperial history and how this has influenced its current national identity and the nostalgic view Britons often have towards the Empire. Sub-chapter 1.3 will illustrate the concept of postcolonial melancholia and how this has ultimately led to Brexit.

## 1.1 Memory Studies

Identity formation is not something that is done individually, but rather a collective process. According to Aleida Assmann "each 'we' is constructed through shared practices and discourses that mark certain boundaries and define the principles of inclusion and exclusion. To be part of a collective group such as the nation one has to share and adopt the group's history, which exceeds the boundaries of one's individual life span."<sup>13</sup> A nation's past, then, is construed through selective recollection. These memories of the past are constructed by institutions like schools, museums, church and government. Institutions like these tend to create an image of the past which is beneficial for their own agenda. As Aleida Assmann states: "The past cannot be 'remembered'; it has to be memorized."<sup>14</sup> This is exactly what happens when history is being taught by these institutions. They create a certain image of the past they want people to memorise, which might omit certain parts of history.

Duncan Bell notes that there are two major problems with how memory is most often used. He firstly states that "memory is not transferable (as memory) to those who have not

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<sup>13</sup> Aleida Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (2008): 52, accessed 9 March, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40972052>.

<sup>14</sup> Assmann, 52.

experienced the events that an individual recalls, which means that it cannot be passed down from generation to generation, let alone ‘cultivated’ or constructed in the minds of those who live often hundreds of years after an event (real or imagined).”<sup>15</sup> Objects like pictures, statues, images and films do not *embody* the memories of those times; they merely *represent* what people think they remember, or what people are taught to remember. The second major problem Bell notes is the question of perspective: “a representation of the past will very much depend on a variety of factors, among which the most important are ethnicity, class, gender and age.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, how Boris Johnson – a 58-year-old white man and Eton-educated politician – remembers the history of the British Empire might be very different from how Sathnam Sanghera – a 46-year-old second-generation Indian immigrant who researches the history of the British Empire – remembers it.

In recent years there has been what Assmann calls a ‘memory boom’, during which not just the institutions mentioned above reconstruct and shape the past, but also politicians, films, activists and media. She states that “The memory boom reflects a general desire to reclaim the past as an important part of the present, and to reconsider, to revalue, and to reassess it as part of individual biographies and the way individuals position themselves in a wider historical perspective.”<sup>17</sup> By making the past so important in the present, in many cases a feeling of nostalgia is created towards this imagined past, as Edward Said observes: “collective memory is not an inert and passive thing, but a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified, and endowed with political meaning.”<sup>18</sup> This was very much played into by the Leave campaign during the 2016 Referendum. They wanted people to remember the past more positively than it actually was,

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<sup>15</sup> Duncan S.A. Bell, “Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2003): 73.

<sup>16</sup> Bell, 73.

<sup>17</sup> Assmann, 54.

<sup>18</sup> Edward W. Said, “Invention, Memory, and Place,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2000): 185, accessed 9 March, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344120>.

expressing that Britain should go back to a time when they governed themselves instead of having to follow the EU's laws. The shortest serving Home Secretary Grant Shapps stated that Britain should try to "re-establish its position as the world's greatest trading nation" and former Brexit Secretary Dominic Raab wants Britain "to resume its 'historic role' as 'buccaneering free traders'."<sup>19</sup> Such processes of nostalgia are also apparent in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, which likewise reveals how notions like collective memory and national identity are mediated by perceptions of the past and how these might have influenced the outcome of Brexit.

### 1.1.1 British Collective Memory

As discussed above, the past is construed through people's selective memory and these memories are largely shaped by institutions like schools, museums, church and government. When this influence occurs, it is not just one's own memory anymore; instead it becomes a collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist, was the first to introduce the term 'collective memory', observing that: "...there exists a collective memory and social framework for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection."<sup>20</sup> He goes on to explain that these frameworks are the groups that he is a part of that give him the means to reconstruct memories, which causes him to adopt their way of thinking at least for some time. In his introduction to Halbwachs' book *On Collective Memory* (1992) Lewis A. Coser explains that "Halbwachs believed that the past was mainly known through symbol and ritualism as well as historiography and biography."<sup>21</sup> Thus, memories are not just stored in someone's brain, but always need stimulation to be recalled. Duncan Bell agrees with

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<sup>19</sup> Sathnam Sanghera, *Empireland* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 115.

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 38.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis A. Coser, introduction to *On Collective Memory*, ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2.

Halbwachs' view that memory exists within a framework of human interaction and states that "Collective memory is...the result of the process whereby individuals interact socially to articulate their memories – of lost relatives, of protest and dissent, of days gone by."<sup>22</sup> So, one's perception of a memory can be influenced by certain people or events.

However, a memory does not necessarily have to be of something they have experienced themselves. As Ann Rigney points out: "through the use of a media product like a book or film, the memory of things they have not directly experienced themselves but that have now become part of their world."<sup>23</sup> Although these media productions might not necessarily provide a complete overview of events, they do become a part of one's memory. Sources like history lessons at school, family history, the news and popular culture are what mainly educates children on Britain's colonial past. As these children grow older there are also influences like the imperial loot that is displayed in museums all over Britain and statements made by prime ministers, like Boris Johnson stating that: "[Africa] may be a blot, but it is not a blot upon our conscience. The problem is not that we were once in charge, but that we are not in charge any more."<sup>24</sup> This is how the collective memory of a nation is formed and shaped by numerous extrinsic sources.

Britain's collective memory is very much shaped by the country's past achievements, which plays into their sense of identity. In his book *Empireland* (2021) Sathnam Sanghera explains that through books and TV programmes Britons are taught that their Empire has shaped the world. He gives examples such as "football, racquet sport, snooker, English literature, the English language...Parliamentary politics, judges wearing wigs in court, the Anglican Church and the structures of contemporary international finance."<sup>25</sup> However these

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<sup>22</sup> Bell, 72.

<sup>23</sup> Ann Rigney, "Literature and Cultural Memory," in *The Life of Texts: An Introduction to Literary Studies*, ed. Kiene Brillenburg Wurth and Ann Rigney (Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 365-66.

<sup>24</sup> Ash Sarkar, "The colonial past is another country. Let's leave Boris Johnson there," *The Guardian*, July 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/10/past-boris-johnson-colonial-brexit-colony>.

<sup>25</sup> Sanghera, 30.

examples are just the more positive influence the British empire has had on the world, completely ignoring the negative impact it has had on the former colonies and the current Overseas Territories. Susan Condor and Steve Fenton point out that “We in England often imagine a national past in which people possessed a stable, clear, unambiguously positive sense of English identity.”<sup>26</sup> What is notable here is that often the term ‘English’ is used instead of ‘British’. That is because when looking back at the country’s history the focus is often solely on England’s history, while ‘British’ is just a term imposed on the non-English by the English.<sup>27</sup> Thus, more negative perceptions of Britain’s history are often left out British collective memory. Like the character Whisky Sisodia states in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988): “The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don’t know what it means.”<sup>28</sup> British collective memory is very much influenced by what is presented as being British history and what is glossed over. This creates a selective amnesia within British collective memory. As long as the focus remains on the British empire having had only a positive impact on the world, this will be reflected in British collective memory.

### 1.1.2 Education

The aforementioned extrinsic sources that shape one’s collective memory can be selective in what they pass on as memories and what is conveniently forgotten. As Rigney points out: “Societies remember selectively and selectivity is a condition for meaning-making. This means that cultural memory and *cultural amnesia* are two sides of the same coin.”<sup>29</sup> Sathnam

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<sup>26</sup> Susan Condor and Steve Fenton, “Thinking Across Domains: Class, Nation and Racism in England and Britain,” *Ethnicities* 12, no. 4 (2012): 390.

<sup>27</sup> Gargi Bhattacharyya, “Cultural Education in Britain: From the Newbolt Report to the National Curriculum,” *Oxford Literary Review* 13, no. 1 (1991): 4–19.

<sup>28</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), quoted in Sathnam Sanghera, *Empireland* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 204-5.

<sup>29</sup> Rigney, 375.

Sanghera mentions how the British education system is severely lacking in its teaching of British imperialism. He places emphasis on the subject of how the British empire has shaped the world, which leaves out the darker side of its history.<sup>30</sup> Young boys at Eton, where many British Prime Ministers have been educated, were given Jan Morris' *Heaven's Command* (1973) to read about the history of the British empire, a book that romanticises and instils nostalgia for the colonial project.<sup>31</sup> Education can thus be seen as a neo-colonial tool to imbue people's minds with particular ideas of the past, especially for a past that one does not have personal memories of.

One topic that is often left out of British history, is how imperialism has caused much of the racial diversity in Britain today. Sanghera points out that "Britain has long struggled to accept the imperial explanation for its racial diversity. The idea that black and brown people are aliens who arrived without permission, and with no link to Britain, to abuse British hospitality is the defining political narrative of my lifetime."<sup>32</sup> This part of Britain's imperial history is neglected at schools. Many Britons seem to not know or 'forget' that after years of imperialism, many immigrants felt a connection to Britain. Not to mention they were legally allowed, and even encouraged, to move to the UK from the late 40s until the early 60s.<sup>33</sup> By not teaching this consequence of imperialism, many Britons feel free to 'Other' these immigrants as not being British. This again comes back to selective amnesia. Ann Rigney states: "The working assumption is that memory is selective and works both as a mechanism of inclusion (in creating a 'we' group) and of exclusion (in 'othering' minorities and immigrants)."<sup>34</sup> So, by not fully educating the population on British imperial history, a space for 'Othering' is created.

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<sup>30</sup> Sanghera, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Sanghera, 174-75.

<sup>32</sup> Sanghera, 75.

<sup>33</sup> Sanghera, 76-77.

<sup>34</sup> Rigney, 366.

As long as the stories of colonial brutality do not become part of British collective memory, it will be difficult to understand the effects the Empire has had on British society and politics. Sanghera points out that this part of history tends “to get overlooked because a sanitized history of the imperial project is required by those who wish to bring it back to life.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, it is a conscious choice to influence British collective memory, especially when it comes to imperial history. What Sanghera is alluding to is what the Leave campaign played into by presenting the European Union as aiding in Britain’s decline. Anshuman A. Mondal explains that “the Leave appeal was entirely emotive and based on striking several chords that resonated with people from working-class and middle-class backgrounds who have not quite gotten used to Britain’s post-imperial decline from top-dog to also-ran.”<sup>36</sup> From this, it becomes clear that influencing a country’s collective memory through education or politics can have a huge impact on its citizens’ perception of the past and what their opinion on what the future should look like.

## 1.2 Imperialism and Nostalgia

When the word ‘empire’ is mentioned, for many the image of British India will come to mind with Queen Victoria as the Empress of all colonial territory. However, the British empire was much larger than just India and existed for much longer than just Victorian times. What complicates writing about Britain’s imperial history, is the fact that it is difficult to pinpoint for how long it existed exactly and how large it was. In his book *Empireland* Sathnam Sanghera comes to the conclusion that “there turns out to be no consensus on where or when British empire actually began.”<sup>37</sup> Which also begs the questions: if the consequences of the British empire are felt to this day, did it ever really end? Although Britain does not have any

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or convivial culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004), 52.

<sup>36</sup> Anshuman A. Mondal, “Scratching the post-imperial itch,” in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), 85.

<sup>37</sup> Sanghera, 34.

colonies anymore, they do still have fourteen overseas territories that remain under British domination, as well as the Commonwealth of Nations which largely consists of former colonies. Some, like Enoch Powell, even go as far as to claim that the British empire is nothing more than a ‘myth’ or ‘invention’.<sup>38</sup> According to Sanghera he claims this because “if British empire never happened, then Britain can’t be said to have declined.”<sup>39</sup> This leads back to a feeling of exceptionalism the British have over their nation, making them see themselves as being above the rules and superior to others.<sup>40</sup> Because only certain elements of the Empire are actively remembered, such as the power and wealth that it brought, this creates a sense of nostalgia for this time in British history. One historical event that shows how deeply rooted the nostalgia for the British empire actually is, is of course Brexit. Since Britain is still stuck in the imperial mindset, they still think in terms of colonizer and colonized. Political commentator Fintan O’Toole points out that “In the imperial imagination, there are only two states: dominant and submissive, colonizer and colonized. This dualism lingers. If England is not an imperial power, it must be the only other thing it can be: a colony.”<sup>41</sup> Britons feared becoming a colony of the European Union so much that they choose to leave it, not thinking of all the consequences this decision would bring with it.

### 1.2.1 British Imperialism

As discussed earlier, Britain tries to ignore and forget certain parts of their unsettling history of Empire. The impact of this becomes clear from a 2014 YouGov poll in which 59 per cent of people voted that the British empire is “something to be proud of” and only 19 per cent voted that it is “something to be ashamed of.” 49 per cent even believe that “former British

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<sup>38</sup> Sanghera, 43-44.

<sup>39</sup> Sanghera, 44.

<sup>40</sup> Sanghera, 121.

<sup>41</sup> Fintan O’Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (London: Apollo, 2018), quoted in Sathnam Sanghera, *Empireland* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 114.

colonies are now better off for having been part of the empire.”<sup>42</sup> The outcome of this poll points towards a feeling of nostalgia towards the Empire among a part of the British population. According to Sanghera, this type of nostalgia can only flourish if such a thing as ‘selective amnesia’ occurs.<sup>43</sup> In order to feel nostalgic for the British empire, most of its history needs to be forgotten. What is often part of this selective amnesia is how imperialism has shaped racism and xenophobia within British society. Paul Gilroy points out “the error of imagining that postcolonial people are only unwanted alien intruders without any substantive historical, political, or cultural connections to the collective life of their fellow subjects.”<sup>44</sup> However, in 1947, when there was a labour shortage after the Second World War, these ‘postcolonial people’ were very much wanted in the UK. Sanghera notes that “In April 1947, it was announced by the Ministry of Labour that 4,000 overseas workers a week would be introduced to Britain.”<sup>45</sup> By 1948 the Nationality Act would be enacted, which give the rights of British citizenship to anyone born within the Empire.<sup>46</sup> Yet, the fact that these people legally immigrated to the UK has not made them any more accepted by Britons.

There is often ambivalence created around imperial history. Once the brutalities committed by the British are brought up, many Britons tend to become defensive of their Empire and will ultimately pose as the victims of their imperial triumphs. Paul Gilroy points out that ultimately there is a desire “to allocate a large measure of blame for the Empire to its victims and then seek to usurp their honored place of suffering, winning many immediate political and psychological benefits in the process. Much of this embarrassing sentiment is today held captive by an unhealthy and destructive postimperial hungering for renewed greatness.”<sup>47</sup> Britain tries to deflect from its current problems by looking back at a time

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<sup>42</sup> Will Dahlgreen, “The British Empire is ‘something to be proud of,’” *YouGov*, 26 July, 2014, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2014/07/26/britain-proud-its-empire>.

<sup>43</sup> Sanghera, 196.

<sup>44</sup> Gilroy, 98.

<sup>45</sup> Sanghera, 76.

<sup>46</sup> Sanghera, 77.

<sup>47</sup> Gilroy, 103.

before it lost its national identity as a great world power and because the complete history of the British empire is often omitted through selective amnesia, including the steady stream of immigrants at that time, a false sense of nostalgia is created.

### 1.2.2 Nostalgia

Various Brexiteers have argued that imperial nostalgia is not the reason they wanted to leave the EU. Jacob Rees-Mogg has “maintained he was inspired by Britain’s nineteenth-century success in free trade”, Priti Patel has claimed that “the Commonwealth was an ‘exemplar’ of ‘free markets, private enterprise and liberal economies’” and Dominic Raab encourages “Britain to resume its ‘historic role’ as ‘buccaneering free traders’.”<sup>48</sup> So, they want Britain to return to its day of free-trading. Yet, it is impossible to see free-trading as being separate from the British empire. Sanghera points out that the problem with this defence is that “as much as some free-traders saw commerce as theoretically separate from the quest for empire, in practice...it wasn’t...even as Britain embraced free-trade ideology *it still had a massive empire, and it was still expanding its empire.*”<sup>49</sup> As much as Brexiteers want to deny that Brexit had anything to do with nostalgia towards the Empire, these arguments only seem to prove that this is the case.

In creating nostalgia, literature can play a significant role. Ann Rigney points out that “...literary texts continue to have meaning as ‘heritage’ – and as sources of meaning-making in the contemporary world – outside of the context in which they were originally written.”<sup>50</sup> Literature can take on its own meaning after it has been written. Stories can help people gain an understanding of the world around them and, whether intentional or not, they can create nostalgia for a time that has passed. Johannes Wally notes that nostalgia “can also be viewed

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<sup>48</sup> Sanghera, 114-15.

<sup>49</sup> Sanghera, 116.

<sup>50</sup> Rigney, 364.

as a form of escapism. The nostalgic evocation of the past indicates a profound dissatisfaction with the present, and ultimately, the political inability to change the present.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, the level of nostalgia in a country can be seen a way to measure political contentment. Many Britons were discontent with their present and wanted to make a change for their future, causing them to vote leave in the Referendum. Kristian Shaw, who introduced the term ‘Brexit’ for fiction that responds to Brexit, states that “many pre-Brexit Europhobic fictions anticipate the thematic concerns encapsulated by this proposed literary term, including the nostalgic appetite for (an admittedly false) national heritage, anxieties surrounding cultural infiltration, and a mourning for the imperial past.”<sup>52</sup> An example of this is Julian Barnes’ *England, England* (1998), in which a theme park is created to encapsule everything that is considered quintessentially English. By the end of the novel, the ‘Old England’ has severely declined, while the theme park has joined the European Union and continues to prosper.<sup>53</sup> Although this is a satirical novel, it clearly depicts Britain’s anxieties of becoming irrelevant.

What becomes clear is that Britain has still not fully processed its loss of power caused by the decline of their former Empire. Because of this it tries to deflect from its current problems by looking back at a time before it lost its national identity as a great world power, which ultimately does not just lead to nostalgia, but also melancholia. Michael Gardiner explains that “Brexit England is really a *mix* of hauntological melancholia - the desire for past collective political potential - and postcolonial melancholia - the desire for lost imperial privilege.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, Britain is still mourning the power and privilege it lost through the decline of their Empire and expresses this nostalgia for a time that has passed.

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<sup>51</sup> Johannes Wally, “The Return of Political Fiction?: An Analysis of Howard Jacobson’s *Pussy* (2017) and Ali Smith’s *Autumn* (2016) as First Reactions to the Phenomena ‘Donald Trump’ and ‘Brexit’ in Contemporary British Literature,” *AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik* 43, no. 1 (2018): 80.

<sup>52</sup> Shaw, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Julian Barnes, *England, England* (London: Vintage, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Michael Gardiner, “Brexit and the aesthetics of anachronism,” in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), 115.

### 1.3 Postcolonial Melancholia

The Oxford Dictionary of English describes melancholia as “a feeling of deep sadness.”<sup>55</sup>

Paul Gilroy has diagnosed Britain with postcolonial melancholia as a result of losing the status of the ‘most powerful nation in the world’. This postcolonial melancholia is deeply

rooted within the xenophobic views held by many Britons. As a nation, Britain has never mourned the immense change that the end of Empire brought about and the loss of

exceptionalism that came with it. This feeling of melancholy has changed over the years.

While in the nineteenth century it was more of a “dignified sadness”, it has turned into “the guilt-ridden loathing and depression that have come to characterize Britain’s xenophobic

responses to the strangers who have intruded upon it more recently.”<sup>56</sup> Gilroy compares

Britain’s postcolonial melancholia with the Germans’ melancholic reaction to the death of Hitler and the post-war guilt that came with this death. He has based these ideas off of

Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s research done on post-war behaviour in West

Germany. They argue that melancholic reactions towards imperial and colonial power are

inherently narcissistic.<sup>57</sup> This feeling of exceptionalism continually returns when going over

the characteristics of British national identity. However, their lack of self-reflection has

caused this postcolonial melancholia to linger. Gilroy goes on to say that:

before the British people can adjust to the horrors of their own modern history and start to build a new national identity from the debris of their broken narcissism, they will have to learn to appreciate the brutalities of colonial rule enacted in their name and their benefit, to understand the damage it did to their political culture at home and abroad, and to consider the extent of their country’s complex investments in the ethnic absolutism that has sustained it.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> "melancholia," in *Oxford Dictionary of English*, edited by Angus Stevenson (Oxford University Press, 2010) [https://www.oxfordreference.com.ru.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m\\_en\\_gb0509870](https://www.oxfordreference.com.ru.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0509870).

<sup>56</sup> Gilroy, 98.

<sup>57</sup> Gilroy, 107-108.

<sup>58</sup> Gilroy, 108.

So, Britons need to work through a feeling of loss and shame towards their imperial and colonial history to be able to achieve a level of maturity needed to create a new national identity that is not based on nostalgia towards the British empire. Yet, it has become clear that change is not welcomed with open arms by Britons.

There is a strong nostalgia and melancholy towards the past, because they feel secure in knowing they used to rule the world. If Britons were to acknowledge the brutalities of colonial rule, they would also have to accept that their beloved Empire is the cause for many of the immigrants now living the UK. As Gilroy states: “The immigrant is now here because Britain, Europe, was once out there; that basic fact of global history is not usually deniable...the incomers may be unwanted and feared precisely because they are the unwitting bearers of the imperial and colonial past.”<sup>59</sup> Immigrants are the constant reminders of the elements of British imperial history that they try to deny or forget. This constant repression of the darker side of the Empire and the pushing forward of the narrative that it was Britain’s greatest achievement causes the hostile responses to immigrants seen today. Gilroy points out that “the hidden, shameful store of imperial horrors has been an unacknowledged presence in British political and cultural life during the second half of the twentieth century.”<sup>60</sup> This has caused much resentment in the British public and ultimately caused the Referendum that led to Brexit. Until Britain is able to fully mourn the loss of empire it will not be able to form a new national identity that includes, but will also go beyond, Britain’s imperial past.

These concepts of memory studies, imperialism and postcolonial melancholia that have been clarified in this chapter will be used in the following chapter to analyse how Ali Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet* makes use of these notions to explain how British collective memory and national identity are mediated by perceptions of the past and how this might have influenced the outcome of Brexit.

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<sup>59</sup> Gilroy, 110.

<sup>60</sup> Gilroy, 102.

## 2. The Seasonal Quartet

The following chapter will provide an analysis of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*. The notions that have been discussed in the theoretical framework chapter will be used to explore how these four novels explore collective memory and national identity in relation to perceptions of the past and Brexit. The first sub-chapter will discuss how Smith uses her characters to show how history and memory are constantly changing. The second sub-chapter will analyse how Smith uses intertextually to show how texts from the past can help understand and analyse the present political climate. The third, and last, sub-chapter will illustrate how Brexit comes to the front throughout the *Quartet* and how it has brought out divisions and xenophobia within British society.

### 2.1 History and (Collective) Memory

When Ali Smith went to see the last letter written by Katherine Mansfield, which was meant to be sent to her friend Ida Baker right before she died, she found out that two versions of the letter exist, namely the original and a later typed-up version. Smith states that “both differ not just from each other but also from the official version in the final volume of Mansfield’s *Collected Letters* (2008); an example, in miniature, of how history loses stuff in plain sight – and in plain sight just makes stuff up.”<sup>61</sup> Throughout the novels Smith also repeatedly makes her characters ask questions about history and memory, about how memory can be collective or separated from person to person and how history and reality can be manipulated by people.

In *Autumn* Daniel tries to teach Elisabeth how different perspectives can change depending on whether someone views something as a memory or as being made up. He does this by playing a game with her where one of them would describe a picture to the other

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<sup>61</sup> Ali Smith, “Before Brexit, Grenfell, Covid-19...Ali Smith on writing four novels in four years,” *The Guardian*, 1 August, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/01/before-brexit-grenfell-covid-19-ali-smith-on-writing-four-novels-in-four-years>.

without actually seeing it at that moment. One day Daniel describes a collage to Elisabeth and she questions how he is going to do this without actually seeing it. Daniel states that he will do this “By seeing it in the imagination, as far as you’re concerned...And in the memory, as far as I’m concerned.”<sup>62</sup> This shows exactly how differently something can be perceived from one person to the next. Later on in the story it becomes clear that the picture Daniel is describing is a real one made by the late Pauline Boty, a female British pop artist of the 1960s. Daniel says: “It’s real... Well, it was once. A friend of mine did it. An artist. But I’m making it up from memory.”<sup>63</sup> So, while for Daniel this collage is a memory of something real, for Elisabeth it is nothing more than imagination. Everyone remembers things differently, influenced by one’s own experience, but also by what is taught about it by people and institutions around them.

In *Winter* Smith goes on to prove this point through Art and Charlotte’s blog ‘Art in Nature’. About halfway through the story it becomes clear that Art does not write about actual experiences he has had in nature, but rather makes them up from looking at places on Google Maps. He says: “It’s not a personal memory I myself have, specifically, no... But it’s a good general sort of invented shareable memory for the people who’ll read the blog.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, while for the reader Art presents his blog as experiences he has had and phenomena he has seen in nature, it turns out that none of it is real. This comes back to what Ann Rigney points out about media products, how these can give someone a memory of something they might not have directly experienced themselves. However, through the influence of these media products, such as blogs, these memories do become part of their world.<sup>65</sup> Thus, while something may be presented as being a real memory online, there is no way of knowing this

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<sup>62</sup> Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 72.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, *Autumn*, 74-75.

<sup>64</sup> Ali Smith, *Winter* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 187.

<sup>65</sup> Rigney, 365-66.

is truly the case. People can easily make up stories about the things they have experienced and the memories they have.

*Spring* focusses on a fictional novel called ‘April’ about Katherine Mansfield and Rainer Maria Rilke, which is being turned into a movie. The novel tells the story of how these two writers lived in the same small town in Switzerland in 1922, but never meet each other. However, the script for the movie changes the story entirely, making Mansfield and Rilke not just meet, but even have an affair. The writer of the script justifies all the changes he makes to the story by stating: “Yes we can change history.”<sup>66</sup> This again proves that not everything that is written in books or shown in films is based on historical facts, even though people will often remember it as such. By fictionalising real people and historical events, false perceptions of the past can be created, which will then become part of people’s collective memory.

One of Grace’s children, Robert, in *Summer* is very much interested in Einstein. When Daniel, who is first introduced in *Autumn*, and Robert meet their conversation goes to Einstein and his stone theory, which is also known as the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen Paradox. Robert explains this theory by stating that “It’s about how reality isn’t what we see or what it seems, and you can prove it, and how susceptible the mind is and how we make stuff up all the time about reality...”<sup>67</sup> The way that Robert explains this theory is in line with what Art does for his blog and how the memory of the lives of Katherine Mansfield and Rainer Maria Rilke are changed through the making of a film. This theory is again evidence that reality is not always presented as it is and can be manipulated by various external forces. What all these stories have in common is that the interactions these characters have confirm that memories and history are never set in stone. They can be influenced by different perceptions

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<sup>66</sup> Ali Smith, *Spring* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 104.

<sup>67</sup> Ali Smith, *Summer* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 350.

of the past people might have, changes that have been made in history and how people approach these (collective) memories.

## 2.2 Intertextuality

In her novel *Artful* (2012), Ali Smith states that “Great books are adaptable; they alter with us as we alter in life, they renew themselves as we change and re-read them at different times in our lives.”<sup>68</sup> She makes use of the adaptability of stories throughout the *Seasonal Quartet* via her use of intertextuality. Two authors that Smith returns to in each of the novels are William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. *Autumn* even opens with an adapted line from Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), namely: “It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times,”<sup>69</sup> describing Britain’s political situation at the time that Smith wrote this story. Throughout the four novels, Smith uses stories and plays by these writers to show how they can still be applied to Britain’s current political climate, especially the outcome of the Brexit referendum.

As mentioned, *Autumn* starts with an adapted line from *A Tale of Two Cities*, however later on in the novel Smith uses a direct quote from the first lines of this story: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.”<sup>70</sup> Elisabeth reads these lines while she is visiting Daniel in the hospital in a dream and finds that these words provide a release for her. This story, written a 165 years ago, offers her a way to process the outcome of the Referendum. Elisabeth’s reaction to reading this quote explains how books and stories can help people with understanding a situation better.

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<sup>68</sup> Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 31.

<sup>69</sup> Smith, *Autumn*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Smith, *Autumn*, 201.

In *Spring* the character Paddy explains to Richard Lease how she gave him the nickname Doubledick. She explains how this stems from an old Charles Dickens story about war, love and friendship. The Richard Doubledick of this story marries into the family of the officer who killed his beloved captain during the war. However, instead of taking revenge, as many might assume he would do, he lets bygones be bygones and lets go of the bitterness. “War won’t stop, the story says. But enmity can. Things can change over time, what looks fixed and pinned and closed in a life can change and open, and what’s unthinkable and impossible at one time will be easily possible in another.”<sup>71</sup> It seems as if Smith would like to teach her readers that sometimes it is better to let go of their perception of the past. Just because something seems fixed because it has been that way for years, does not mean that it can never change.

Smith goes on to use Dickens’ stories in *Summer* by mentioning *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* (1848). The character Daniel explains this “little Christmas story” when writing to his sister Hannah while he was interned on the Isle of Man during the Second World War. About this novella he writes the following:

a man asks a ghost to take his memory away so he will stop feeling sad about painful things he remembers. So the ghost does, it removes all the memories that cause the man pain. But the pain itself doesn’t go away, though the knowledge of why there IS pain has vanished. Then the man becomes bitter and angry and bewildered as to why he feels pain. And then, like a contagion, this bitterness and anger and the loss of memory of difficult things infect everyone the man comes in contact with, and soon everybody in the town is angry and bitter with no idea why.<sup>72</sup>

This exactly what happens when a nation has selective memory. There is pain, but not everyone remembers where it comes from or why it is there. To come back to a quote previously mentioned by Ann Rigney: “Societies remember selectively and selectivity is a condition for meaning-making. This means that cultural memory and *cultural amnesia* are

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<sup>71</sup> Smith, *Spring*, 248.

<sup>72</sup> Smith, *Summer*, 188.

two sides of the same coin.”<sup>73</sup> The past is selectively memorised because it is selectively taught. The quote about *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* shows what happens to a society does not want to remember exactly why there is pain and conveniently ‘forgets’ the darker side of its past, which quite accurately describes how the Brexit referendum even came into existence. Many Britons blamed their hurting on the European Union, without fully knowing their country’s past and thus not understanding where their country’s hardships stemmed from. This is a great example of how collective memory and collective amnesia can have a negative effect on a country.

In a feature for Penguin Ali Smith stated that “Books, I’ve always believed, aren’t really written by writers, but by everything that person’s read. It’s the writing that already exists that begets the writing.”<sup>74</sup> This is very clear in her own writing, not only is Dickens visible throughout the *Quartet*, but also Shakespeare is a common theme in all novels. For example, in *Autumn* Daniel takes Elisabeth to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611) when she is eleven years old, telling her that it is a play about “civilization, colonization and imperialism,”<sup>75</sup> which she finds boring. However, Daniel goes on to explain that it is about much more than that, “It was also about fairness and unfairness, and people getting hypnotized on an island and hatching plots against each other to see who could take control of the island, and some characters were meant to be the slaves and other characters got to be freed.”<sup>76</sup> It is not without reason that the slogan of the Leave campaign was ‘Taking back control’. According to them it was time to take back control of ‘their island’ from European regulations and the immigrants who had invaded their country. Smith shows how perceptions

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<sup>73</sup> Rigney, 375.

<sup>74</sup> “Ali Smith’s Seasonal Quartet: an oral history,” *Penguin*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/08/ali-smith-autumn-winter-spring-summer-seasonal-quartet-oral-history>.

<sup>75</sup> Smith, *Autumn*, 207.

<sup>76</sup> Smith, *Autumn*, 207-8.

of the past have not only influenced the outcome of Brexit, but also how past texts can still be used to describe the present.

Another example of this is in *Winter*, where Smith uses Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (1611) to seemingly describe Britain. In the novel Lux describes it as "A play about a kingdom subsumed in chaos, lies, powermongering, division and a great deal of poisoning and self-poisoning,"<sup>77</sup> which is in line with how Daniel describes *The Tempest*. Lux goes on to state that:

it's like people in the play are living in the same world but separately from each other, like their worlds have somehow become disjointed or broken off each other's worlds. But if they could just step out of themselves, or just hear and see what's happening right next to their ears and eyes, they'd see it's the same play they're all in, the same world, that they're all part of the same story.<sup>78</sup>

Maybe if the Remain and Leave campaigns had been able to realise they were both fighting for the same country, there would not have been so much division and chaos in Britain now. Smith shows her readers how useful stories can be in helping people understand their country's current situation. These novels show how various people (characters) have found ways of how their perception, or a writer's perception, of the past can help them deal with and acknowledge the issues of the present. It can also help them understand how their country's current perception of the past came to be.

### 2.3 Brexit

Ali Smith's plan before writing the *Seasonal Quartet* was to "write a series of books written tightly to deadline, about time, and about the times in which they're being written... Well, the project's finished, and nothing's over. The novel's a form of continuance."<sup>79</sup> The *Seasonal*

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<sup>77</sup> Smith, *Winter*, 200.

<sup>78</sup> Smith, *Winter*, 201.

<sup>79</sup> Ali Smith, "Before Brexit, Grenfell, Covid-19... Ali Smith on writing four novels in four years," *The Guardian*, 1 August, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/01/before-brexit-grenfell-covid-19-ali-smith-on-writing-four-novels-in-four-years>.

*Quartet* tells the story of a divided country over the course of five years. *Autumn* starts out when the country was still trying to come to terms with the outcome of the Referendum. By the time *Summer* is published, Britain has officially left the European Union and has been dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, just like the rest of the world. The novels show how various characters, representing members of the British population, cope with the current affairs troubling the country.

Throughout the *Seasonal Quartet* Smith explores different reactions to the outcome of the Referendum. Although *Autumn* is considered to be the first Brexlit novel<sup>80</sup>, the word ‘Brexit’ is not once mentioned in the book. Smith only alludes to the events happening in Britain at the time. The first time she writes about the Referendum is when Elisabeth is walking through her mother’s village and notes that “It is just over a week since the vote.”<sup>81</sup> Elisabeth’s mother says that she is “tired of sanctified liars. I’m tired of how those liars have let this happen. I’m tired of having to wonder whether they did it out of stupidity or did it on purpose. I’m tired of lying governments.”<sup>82</sup> Through this statement she represents how many Remain voters felt after the outcome of the Referendum. In his book on the connection between Brexit and literature, Kristian Shaw states that “Brexit did not divide the nation, it merely revealed the inherent divisions within society.”<sup>83</sup> This is exactly what Smith does in *Autumn*. She shows the various reactions within British society to the outcome of the Referendum by writing:

All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing...All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing...All across the country, people looked up Google: *what is EU?*...All across the country, people felt history at their shoulder. All across the country, people felt history meant nothing...All across the country, people told people to leave...All across the country, people said it wasn’t that they didn’t like immigrants. All across the country,

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<sup>80</sup> Shaw, 20.

<sup>81</sup> Smith, *Autumn*, 53.

<sup>82</sup> Smith, *Autumn*, 57.

<sup>83</sup> Kristian Shaw, “BrexLit,” in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), 16.

people said it was about control...All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there, a line drawn here, a line crossed there...<sup>84</sup>

This section of the novel is written in a similar vein as the opening of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, full of contradictories and, like many of Dickens' novels, filled with commentary on British society. This demonstrates how divided the British population is when it comes to Brexit. These opposing views are further explored by Smith in the rest of the *Seasonal Quartet*.

In *Winter* this division becomes clear through the stark contrast between sisters Sophia and Iris. While Sophia is seen as business-minded and intelligent, Iris has always protested and marched for what she believed in, making her a radical in Sophia's eyes. This comes to a head when the Referendum is brought up. Iris says: "I bet I know what you voted...In the so-called vote. My sister. The so-called intelligent one. I was the wild one. So-called."<sup>85</sup> Sophia opposes this by stating: "The so-called vote...was a vote to free our country from inheriting the troubles of other countries, as well as from having to have laws that weren't made here for people like us by people like us."<sup>86</sup> From this interaction it becomes apparent that there is also division among people of the same generation around Brexit, not just between young and old. The two sisters show how various perspectives can be when it comes to the outcome of the Referendum and how people might have justified their vote for Leave or Remain.

Throughout *Spring* Smith addresses Brexit through small comments made by characters. For example when Brit crosses the border of Scotland together with Florence she makes this comment about passports: "You don't need one... Not for this border. Not yet, anyway."<sup>87</sup> This comment addresses how there has been interest in a second referendum

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<sup>84</sup> Smith, *Autumn*, 59-61.

<sup>85</sup> Smith, *Winter*, 206.

<sup>86</sup> Smith, *Winter*, 206.

<sup>87</sup> Smith, *Spring*, 195.

about Scottish independence.<sup>88</sup> Scotland has been forced to leave the EU because it is a part of the United Kingdom, even though only 38 per cent of its population voted Leave in the Referendum.<sup>89</sup> This comes back to what Gargi Bhattacharyya points about British history often focusing on the English, rather than all of its constituents.<sup>90</sup> If a country's collective memory is moulded to leave out some of its constituents from its narrative it is no wonder people start to feel left out. It is like Edward Said states, "collective memory is not an inert and passive thing, but a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified, and endowed with political meaning."<sup>91</sup> This is what happened in the years before Brexit, collective memory was moulded in such a way that perceptions of the past became more positive than the view of the country's now and future, creating an unwarranted nostalgia in the public. Nostalgia not only for the glory days of the British empire, as Smith states "Nostalgia for the empire's back big-time"<sup>92</sup>, but also a time when there were less immigrants. At a meeting of Italian conservatives and right-wingers in Rome last year, current British prime minister Rishi Sunak even stated that "enemies were deliberately driving people to our shores to try to destabilise our society,"<sup>93</sup> giving a voice to the narrative of Othering in the United Kingdom. Throughout *Spring* Smith makes a lot of comments about how badly immigrants are treated in the UK through the narrative of Brit(tany) who works at a UK immigration removal centre owned SA4A (a company that returns in all four novels), a place that was first built for 72-hour detention at the most, but people had been in there for years, years and years.<sup>94</sup> One of the detainees says to Brit: "I've done three years in here for the crime of being a migrant...I crossed the world to come here

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<sup>88</sup> Goodwin and Heath, 324.

<sup>89</sup> Goodwin and Heath, 324.

<sup>90</sup> Bhattacharyya, 4–19.

<sup>91</sup> Said, 185.

<sup>92</sup> Smith, *Spring*, 43.

<sup>93</sup> Dominic McGrath, "Sunak warns migrants could 'overwhelm' countries in Rome speech," *Independent*, 16 December, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/rishi-sunak-giorgia-meloni-rome-edi-rama-prime-minister-b2465282.html>.

<sup>94</sup> Smith, *Spring*, 135.

to ask you for help...And you locked me in this cell.”<sup>95</sup> Smith shows how politics can blind people to the reality of what is happening in their country and how perceptions of the past can be influenced by politics and vice versa.

Xenophobic views that are mentioned in the previous novels are also returned to in *Summer*. Smith does this by drawing on similarities between Daniel being internee in a prison camp during World War II and the UK immigration removal centre from *Spring*. While interned at the camp Daniel and his fellow prisoners write a letter to the press to bring awareness to their situation. They write: “We came to England because we believed that here...last hope of Democracy in Europe...Art cannot live behind barbed...and restore to us - all refugees from Nazi oppression - the one thing no artist can live and work without: FREEDOM.”<sup>96</sup> From this it becomes clear that immigrants have been treated with disdain for a long time. According to Paul Gilroy this xenophobia stems from the country’s postcolonial melancholia<sup>97</sup>, which evidently started long before there even was a European Union for the UK to exit. As mentioned earlier in theoretical framework chapter, Gilroy further states that the immigrant is here due to Britain having once been out there, these incomers are the unknowing bearers of the country’s imperial and colonial past, causing them to be unwanted and feared.<sup>98</sup> Through the connection she makes between the prison camps of World War II and the immigration removal centres of current times, Smith points out that history will keep repeating itself until Britons have found a way to come to terms with the fact that they have instigated the never-ending stream of immigrants during the time of their Empire. They need to embrace this side of their history into their collective memory and national identity in order for that to happen.

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<sup>95</sup> Smith, *Spring*, 159-160.

<sup>96</sup> Smith, *Summer*, 171.

<sup>97</sup> Gilroy, 110.

<sup>98</sup> Gilroy, 110.

## Conclusion

Through the analysis of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, this thesis has aimed to show how these novels portray notions such as collective memory, national identity and postcolonial melancholia as being fluid and how these notions might have influenced the outcome of the Brexit Referendum. This conclusion aims to combine the arguments that have come forth from the analysis in order to answer the research question and discuss the implications of this research.

Throughout the *Seasonal Quartet* Smith uses her characters to show how history and (collective) memory are constantly changing processes, rather than being set in stone. Memory is a theme that prominently features throughout the entire *Quartet*. Smith explores this through art, a blog, a film adaptation and intertextuality. Through their experiences the characters in the novels show much their, and others, (collective) memory can be influenced by various external forces. This is in line with Aleida Assmann and Edward Said's theories of how (collective) memory is a constant process, rather than a passive thing. It is constantly changing and influenced by past events that are reconstructed with political meaning.<sup>99</sup> This is also done through the fictionalisation of real people and historical events, such as the film adaptation of the novel about Katherine Mansfield and Rainer Maria Rilke in *Spring*. Thus, a person's (collective) memory can be changed through the influence of politics and all sorts of media, making it difficult to distinguish what is real.

In the *Seasonal Quartet* Smith uses intertextuality to further show her readers how texts from the past can help understand and analyse the present political climate. Texts by Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare are used to help describe how Britain's population is feeling after the Referendum and help them process the consequences of this decision, like *A Tale of Two Cities* does for Elisabeth in *Autumn*. Through this Smith shows how relevant

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<sup>99</sup> Said, 185.

these texts still are in the present, even though they were written hundreds of years ago. Perceptions of the past and people's memory can be influenced by texts, however texts can also be manipulated to help people understand the past and in turn also process the present. That is what Smith does in her *Seasonal Quartet*, she shows her readers all sides of the story: the past and the present, through the means of intertextuality and her various characters' understanding of these texts.

Through these characters Smith also brings the discussion of Brexit to the front. The novels show how the Referendum has highlighted a division and xenophobia within the British population, that was there long before any discussion of leaving the EU was started. As Paul Gilroy has pointed out, this xenophobia stems from the postcolonial melancholia the country suffers from, which is the inability to process the loss of Empire<sup>100</sup>. Someone needs to be blamed for the hardships Britain is facing and this is often blamed on immigrants and the European union. Smith makes the connection between the prison camps of World War II and the immigration removal centres of current times to show how the narrative of Othering immigrants has not changed after all this time. Britain will have to embrace all sides of their history of Empire and include this into their collective memory and national identity in order to move forward without perceptions of the past interfering.

Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* shows how certain perceptions of Britain's past are still present on today's politics. These perceptions influence the country's collective memory and national identity, and bring xenophobia to the front that is caused by postcolonial melancholia. Although Smith proves that these notions are not set in stone, but can be rather fluid, Britain still has a long process ahead of them before they are able to accept their entire imperial history into their collective memory and national identity, and thus let go of their postcolonial melancholia. In a YouGov pole taken at the end of 2022, people who had voted

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<sup>100</sup> Gilroy, 110.

Leave during the Referendum were asked why they now thought that it was wrong for Britain to leave the EU. 25% of voters stated that things have gotten worse since then, while 11% voted that they were lied to and things had not turned out how they expected.<sup>101</sup> This shows that people are starting to realise that maybe the European Union was not to blame for the issues Britain is facing, which is a small step in the right direction.

Even though this thesis only provides analyses of four novels written by the same author, it may provide helpful insight into how novels can reflect the issues that trouble a society, especially when it comes to such influential political events as Brexit. Possible future research could compare Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* with other Brexlit novels such as Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* or Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* to compare how they might present notions like collective memory and national identity differently. This can lead to a better understanding of what cultural influence Brexit might have had on British society.

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<sup>101</sup> Adam McDonnell, "Why have some Leave voters changed their mind on Brexit?," *YouGov*, January 6, 2023, <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/44916-why-have-some-leave-voters-changed-their-mind-brex>.

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