

MARGINALITY AND IDENTITY IN ALI SMITH'S *SPRING*

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Abstract

This paper addresses the research question: How are marginalisation and identity constructed in Ali Smith's *Spring*, and what role does the past Brexit political context play in this construction? The aim is to explore how Smith's novel reflects on questions of belonging, exclusion, and transformation in contemporary Britain. The analysis adopts a qualitative methodology, combining close textual reading with cultural and linguistic approaches, in order to examine the interactions and experiences of Richard, Brittany, and Florence as central figures negotiating marginalisation and identity.

Findings indicate that *Spring* portrays marginalisation not only as a condition of refugees, migrants, and outsiders, but also as a broader symptom of fractured national identity in post-Brexit England. Through linguistic experimentation, cultural references, and shifting narrative perspectives, the novel highlights how language, social norms, and cultural boundaries intersect to shape individuals' sense of self and belonging. While the narrative exposes the realities of exclusion and displacement, it also suggests the potential for renewal through openness to change. Ultimately, Smith's text encourages readers to recognise that, even in fractured cultural landscapes, individuals can become protagonists of their own transformative narratives.

Key-words: *marginality, identity, language, culture, social norms, belonging, Ali Smith, Spring.*

1. Definition of Marginality and Identity

According to the psychologist and narratologist Michael Bamberg, identity “designates the attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions such as gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory” (Michael Bamberg, 2013:241). According to Afua Hirsch in *BRIT(ish) On Race, Identity and Belonging*, “When it comes to identity, names matter” (page 33). In the same book we have illustrated the life of a “Ghanaian”, who is British “I am British after all – it's my home, my nationality, my frame of reference. I've spent almost all my life in England [...]” however, there is always a reminder of that sense of not belonging by getting the annoying question “Where are you from?” (Afua Hirsch, 2019:35) Therefore, not only the name matters but the appearance too. Numerous narratives have delved into matters of identity, ranging from the

traditional Bildungsroman, which depicts the growth and education of the main character from youth to maturity, to contemporary explorations of the fractured self in both literature and personal accounts.

The term “marginality” is commonly employed to interpret and scrutinize socio-cultural, political, and economic domains wherein disadvantaged individuals contend with obstacles to accessing resources and equal involvement in social activities.

Similarly, the literature of marginality is the literature that deals with the marginalized class of the world who are kept devoid of their fundamental rights to participate in the social, religious, cultural, political, educational and economic spheres. These individuals are often physically isolated, are kept aloof, alienated or segregated from the broader populace, referred to as the sophisticated elite or upper classes of society. The situation was a lot clearer after the 2016 referendum. Brexit marked the first major national political decision structured primarily around identity divisions. Traditional lines of conflict - such as class, income, economic ideology and perceptions of economic competence - were relegated to the background. Instead, divides based on education, ethnicity, age and views on national identity, equal opportunities and especially immigration, became the decisive factors shaping voter’s choice. “Once the referendum provided the moment of awakening for these conflicts, voters became acutely aware of these new divisions.” (Maria Sobolewska, Robert Ford, 2020:11-12) Therefore, marginality has got more emphasised after Brexit. Marginality serves as an exposé, revealing the plight of marginalized communities and highlighting the persistent challenges they face. Despite the claims of developed and developing nations to address issues such as economic, gender and caste-based discrimination, the reality remains that marginalized groups continue to endure immense suffering. This includes the pervasive problem of caste and untouchability, which persists despite significant efforts and resources dedicated to addressing social and economic disparities. Marginality literature sheds light on the ongoing struggles of these communities and underscores the urgent need for meaningful change and inclusive policies.

An example in this matter, *Spring* by Ali Smith also touches upon themes of marginality and social divisions, albeit in a more abstract and nuanced manner compared to some other works. While not explicitly focused on marginalized communities in the same way as the other novels, *Spring* engages with contemporary issues and challenges prevalent in British society.

2. Exploring Marginality and Identity in Ali Smith's *Spring*: A Cross-Cultural Analysis

Through its characters and narrative threads, *Spring* explores the impact of political upheaval, the refugee crisis, and environmental degradation on individuals and communities. The novel explores the complexities of identity, belonging and human connection in an increasingly fragmented world. While not directly centred on marginalized groups, *Spring* addresses the broader social tensions and inequalities that affect people from all walks of life.

Ali Smith's distinctive prose and experimental storytelling techniques invite readers to consider the ways in which social marginalization and exclusion manifest in both overt and subtle ways. *Spring* ultimately offers a thought-provoking reflection on the interconnectedness of humanity and the need for empathy, understanding, and solidarity in the face of adversity.

Ali Smith's third instalment of her Seasonal Quartet, *Spring*, has gathered considerable acclaim, much like its predecessors, *Autumn* and *Winter*. In 2019, Dwight Garner described the book as "the most political book thus far in this earthy and humane series". In the same year, Butter said that Ali Smith is a "masterful storyteller" who "with just few words [...] can build engaging worlds and identifiable characters". In *The Guardian*, Sam Jordison criticizes the plot for feeling "too unreal" (Sam Jordison, 2019) and finds the contemporary issues tackled in the novel to be "too familiar". Conversely, Justine Jordan, also writing for *The Guardian*, believes that with each new instalment in the series, Smith's "own role in British fiction looks ever more vital" (Justine Jordan, 2019). Additionally, Ceri Radford (2019) of *The Independent* hails "Spring" as "an astonishing accomplishment" and "a book for all seasons", praising its "timeless" (Ceri Radford, 2019) quality and moral urgency.

The utilization of seasonal mythology sets Smith's quartet apart, especially in its characterization as a series of politically charged novels. Its broader aspirations are hinted at through multiple allusions to Shakespeare's later works: *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*. These plays are imbued with fanciful narratives, deeply rooted in myth and folklore, featuring enchanting transformations and exploring dark themes, yet ultimately diverging from the irreversible bleakness of tragedy. Shakespearean romance, as Marjorie Garber aptly states, "speaks about society by speaking about poetry, art, dream, and transcendence"; (Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, p. 773) romances "enact patterns of desire and loss and fear and passion and hatred and ambition, just like the tragedies, but they do so as if they were happening inside our own imaginations, rather than inside the minds of Shakespeare's introspective and ruminative heroes". (Marjorie Garber, 2005:757) The concept reappears throughout the quartet, which serves as an extensive exploration of the essence of art, brimming with contemplations on the formal and emotional aspects of various mediums such as painting, sculpture, photography, film and literature. Smith's characters are guided to grasp their own identities and the world around them through their experiences with and contemplations on art.

Mentoring connections hold significant value for Smith as they embody the uplifting concepts of rejuvenation and change. Teaching imparts fresh vitality to existing knowledge, while learning offers a refreshed perspective on the world and fosters personal growth. Moreover, these relationships afford the novels the freedom to be openly expressive.

In *Spring*, Richard Lease, a filmmaker, admires the acerbic sharp-tongued screenwriter and "glamorous older woman" (Ali Smith, *Spring*, p.20) named Paddy. Paddy not only provides him with invaluable career guidance but also imparts wisdom on narrative techniques, even recommending that he should delve into the works of Katherine Mansfield. Smith adeptly captures the dynamic

between disparate intellects, drawing out humour and vitality. Her portrayal of highly intelligent children and young women showcases her distinct talent. The second part of *Spring* shifts its focus to the dynamic between a detention-centre guard named Brittany, whom everyone calls Brit (there is a bit of allegorical or ironic naming in Smith's novels), and a remarkably astute twelve-year-old girl who she encounters at a train station. This girl, named Florence, has a great ability to go by the security checkpoints without being detected. Their relationship offers a reversal of the traditional mentoring dynamic, as the girl's blend of innocence and perceptiveness challenges Brit's entrenched beliefs. Therefore, we can clearly see the fact that Smith's characters, though richly individualized, often assume representative or archetypal roles, embodying various political and philosophical viewpoints.

3. Navigating Boundaries: Art, Politics and Identity in Ali Smith's *Spring*

In her exploration of the distinction between edges and borders, Smith skilfully maintains the necessary separation between art and politics, avoiding a complete divorce while steering clear of didacticism. This tension arises from her manipulation of time (despite ostensibly being about the present, her novels frequently traverse different time periods, drawing meaning from juxtapositions and parallels, suggesting that reality can be rearranged and comprehended in various ways) and her adeptness at shifting between fictional modes. The overtly topical elements of her novels, such as the portrayals of the dehumanizing treatment of prisoners in Brit's detention centre in *Spring*, blend into a sense of unreality particularly where the rigid boundaries and exclusions imposed by politics expose their artificiality and fragility.

If the quartet can be interpreted as a form of satire, it critiques the arbitrary regulations surrounding identity and belonging which ultimately aim to suppress or deny humanity. The evidence that these strict delineations are flawed lies in the realm of art, which has never adhered to borders. Smith's views on borders are echoed in *Spring* by the remarkably perceptive twelve-year-old girl who consistently outwits security guards:

What if, the girl says. Instead of saying, this border divides these places. We said, this border unites these places. This border holds together these two really interesting different places. What if we declared border crossings places where, listen, when you crossed them, you yourself became doubly possible. [...] (Ali Smith, *Spring*, 2020:196)

"You're being naïve." (Ali Smith, 2020:196) Brit immediately points out. However, the girl epitomizes her own concept. Her lack of roots and constant movement aligns her within the quartet alongside two other significant marginalized personas, those who traverse borders and harbour uncertain senses of belonging: the refugee and the vagrant. Described as resembling a figure from legend or folklore, she embodies a character straight out of a fairy tale, a notion

that, as Brit apprehends, carries a hint of peril in its proximity. The peril lies in the notion that sometimes the naive perspective holds the truth and essential insight, acknowledging that the unreality inherent in fairy tales is what makes them inherently subversive.

4. Unexpected Bleakness: Exploring Contrasts in Ali Smith's 'Spring'

Despite expectations shaped by Smith's Dickensian realism and poetic style, along with her tendency to address complex contemporary issues like Brexit, racism, immigration, poverty, and climate change in a hopeful manner, readers may find *Spring* to be unexpectedly bleak. Indeed, the novel presents the gloomiest portrayal yet, reflecting on the notion that spring does not always arrive with full force, particularly after a prolonged winter. Smith vividly depicts this desolation:

It was the time of the year when everything was dead. I mean dead in a way that meant it seemed that nothing would ever live again. The sky was a massive closed door. The cloud was dull metal. The trees were bare and broken. The ground was ungiving. The grass was dead. The birds were absent. The fields were frozen ruts of earth and the deadness went down under the surface for miles. Everywhere, the people were afraid. Food stocks were low. The barns were almost empty. [...] (Ali Smith, *Spring*, 2019, p. 225).

This is in contradiction with a season which represents a new life, in which everything and everyone receives a new beginning.

From the political point of view, we can say that the description of barrenness and fear among people could symbolize a state of crisis or political instability. This could be indicative of a time of hardship, possibly brought about by political decisions or external factors affecting governance. The scarcity of food stocks and emptiness of barns might imply issues with governance, such as mismanagement or neglect of resources.

The absence of life and vitality in the environment could metaphorically represent a lack of hope or progress under the current political regime. The closed sky and dull clouds could symbolize oppressive or restrictive political systems that limit opportunities and growth.

Marginalization is emphasized by the fear and scarcity described in the above excerpt which can reflect the experiences of marginalized communities who often bear the brunt of social and economic hardships. These communities may lack access to essential resources and support systems, leading to heightened vulnerability during times of crisis.

The mention of "everywhere, the people were afraid" (Ali Smith, 2020: 225) suggests a pervasive sense of vulnerability and marginalization among the population. This could be attributed to socioeconomic disparities, discrimination, or systemic injustices that disproportionately affect marginalized groups.

The quotation above can be looked at through various lenses which explore themes of political instability, marginalization, and the intersection of identity with socio-economic conditions. Identity itself can be pictured in the image of the barren landscape and absence of life which could be interpreted as a reflection of the erosion of cultural identity or the suppression of individual expression. In times of crisis or political turmoil, people feel disconnected from their cultural roots or struggle to assert their identity in the face of adversity.

The reference to “almost empty” barns and low food stocks may also speak to issues of agricultural identity and the significance of food production in shaping cultural and communal identity. The scarcity of food resources could threaten the traditional ways of life and cultural practices tied to agriculture.

Now what we don't want is Facts. What we want is bewilderment. What we want is repetition. What we want is repetition. What we want is people in power saying the truth is not the truth. What we want is elected members of parliament saying knife getting heated stuck in her front and twisted things like bring your own noose we want governing members of parliament in the house of commons shouting kill yourself at opposition members of parliament we want powerful people chopped up in bags in my freezer we want muslim women a joke in a newspaper column we want the laugh we want the sound of that laugh behind them everywhere they go. We want the people we call foreign to feel foreign we need to make it clear they can't have rights unless we say so. [...] (Ali Smith, *Spring*, page 3)

The novel starts in a very dynamic style, highlights how various forms of marginalization intersect with one another and contribute to the perpetuation of oppression and injustice in society. It underscores the importance of understanding intersectionality in addressing systemic inequalities and advocating for social justice. The book points out the intersectional marginality right from the very beginning, by illustrating how various forms of marginalization intersect with other aspects of identity. The mention of “muslim women a joke in a newspaper column” (Ali Smith, 2020:3) highlights the marginalization experience by Muslim individuals, particularly women, due to their race and religious identity. This intersects with the broader theme of racism and xenophobia. The reference to “Knife getting heated stuck in her front and twisted” (Ali Smith, 2020:3) and “bring your noose” (Ali Smith, 2020:3) suggests violence against women, which intersects with gender-based oppression. Additionally, the mention of “powerful people chopped up in bags in my freezer” (Ali Smith, 2020:3) implies violence and dehumanization, which can be viewed through the lens of gender-based violence.

The desire that the “foreign to feel foreign we need to make it clear they can't have rights unless we say so” (Ali Smith, 2020:3) highlights some of the Brits' deepest wish, one of the main reasons why Brexit was implemented. The foreign should feel foreign and the assertion that they cannot have rights unless dictated by those in power speak to systemic inequalities based on socioeconomic

status. Marginalized groups, including immigrants and lower-income individuals, often face barriers to accessing rights and resources due to their socioeconomic status.

Also, we should take into account that the mention of “muslim women” and the desire for “foreign” people to feel foreign suggests the intersection of cultural identity with marginalization. Language and culture likely play significant roles in shaping individuals’ experiences of belonging and identity within these marginalized groups. While not directly addressed, the text indirectly points to the need for cultural revitalization within marginalized communities. The desire to make “foreign” people feel foreign may also reflect the attempts to suppress and erase cultural identities. However, the very act of resistance against such efforts can be seen as a form of cultural revitalization and celebration.

Conclusions

The paper highlights the close connection between marginalization and identity, showing how social, cultural and political forces often overlap in ways that reinforce oppression and injustice. Understanding intersectionality is essential here, since different forms of disadvantage rarely occur in isolation; instead, they overlap and intensify one another, shaping the lived experiences of individuals and communities. Issues such as political instability, social exclusion and the impact of economic conditions on identity reveal just how complex contemporary society is, as well as the urgent need for fairer, more inclusive policies. Ali Smith’s *Spring* offers a powerful exploration of these concerns, drawing attention to our shared humanity and role of empathy, compassion and solidarity in easing social tensions and addressing inequality.

At the same time, the novel underlines the importance of art, literature and storytelling as tools of resistance. They challenge systemic injustices, guard against cultural erasure and create space for revitalization, pride and celebration within marginalized communities.

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