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The Crisis of British Democracy in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*

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Your time's over. Democracy. You lost. (*Autumn* 112)

Abstract

Interest about the political, social and economic situation of a country has always been in the public eye. The UK has lately experienced a major change at all levels, which has arisen great concerns about it. Narrowing down the area, the latest novels written by Ali Smith concentrate on the events taking place in the United Kingdom, providing observations about the existent crisis of British democracy. These novels make up what is known as the *Seasonal Quartet: Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), *Summer* (2020); and their follow-up novel *Companion Piece* (2022). The fact that Smith's novels are difficult to classify, connects the author with the literary period some scholars agree to call 'metamodernism', a period with a new sensibility and with stylistic innovations. This dissertation carries out an analysis of the most recurrent topics in Smith's novels, namely Brexit, immigration, Covid-19, modern technology and the generational gap.

Key words

Metamodernism, Ali Smith, *Seasonal Quartet*, *Companion Piece*, crisis of democracy, United Kingdom.

Resumen

El interés por la situación política, social y económica de un país siempre ha estado en el punto de mira. Últimamente, el Reino Unido ha experimentado un gran cambio en todos los ámbitos, lo que ha suscitado una gran inquietud al respecto. Acotando el ámbito, las últimas novelas escritas por Ali Smith se centran en los acontecimientos que tienen lugar en el Reino Unido, aportando observaciones sobre la crisis actual de la democracia británica. Estas novelas conforman lo que se conoce como el *Cuarteto Estacional: Otoño* (2016), *Invierno* (2017), *Primavera* (2019), *Verano* (2020); y su continuación *Companion Piece* (2022). El hecho de que las novelas de Smith sean difíciles de clasificar, conecta a la autora con el periodo literario que algunos académicos coinciden en llamar "metamodernismo", un periodo con una nueva sensibilidad y con innovaciones estilísticas. Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado analiza los temas más recurrentes en las novelas de Smith como son el Brexit, la inmigración, Covid-19, la tecnología moderna y la brecha generacional.

Palabras clave

Metamodernismo, Ali Smith, *Cuarteto Estacional*, *Companion Piece*, crisis democrática, Reino Unido.

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1. Introduction

Smith is a critically acclaimed author who has been commended for her experimental and uncommon approach to literature. In fact, it is through the metamodernist lens that we can gain a better understanding of her novels. More specifically speaking, Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* [*Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), *Summer* (2020)]; and their follow-up novel *Companion Piece* (2022) have been potentially praised for their unique storytelling, contextualized in the present times when Ali Smith writes the novels. Bearing in mind that Ali Smith is a contemporary writer, the novels abovementioned highlight the so recent events the United Kingdom is living. Moreover, they can be seen as a pronounced portrayal of the UK's contemporary society and the challenges the British citizens are facing. The fact that the novels are based on the events of a sole country, gives rise to the issues and effects explored, which can be taken to the complexities several communities undergo in our modern world.

An analysis of the most repeated topics in the novels will be carried out together with an exploration of the British context. Brexit and immigration are two of the most crucial issues at the present time, as well as the impact of Covid-19 on the British citizens' daily lives. In addition, the role of technology will be analyzed in terms of the effects caused in mankind and, lastly, the topic of the generational gap will be explored in connection to human relations.

Overall, following this final dissertation's objectives, I shall undertake an exploration of the literary period the United Kingdom is presently experiencing, and the references made by Ali Smith to the country's current events.

2. The literary context

2.1. Which literary period are we in?

Doubts concerning the period to which the current literature belongs to are constantly emerging among scholars. The fact that modernism has been studied for a long period of time, makes us able to construct the idea of repoliticizing modernism as a global practice (James and Seshagiri 90). Whenever literary periods are mentioned, we should also refer to the cultural and artistic scene in general. The world changes with time, paving its way to new geopolitical structures, to new concepts such as environmental “greenprints”, while abandoning certain aesthetic notions of pastiche, deconstruction... (Wallace 5678). Hence, today’s society cannot be explained with white, western male features (as in modernism), neither exclusively with heterogeneous characteristics of “race, gender, class, and locality” (as in Postmodernism) (Wallace 5679-5680). At the 2009 Tate Triennial, Nicolas Bourriaud said that the postmodern period ended many years ago, clearing the way to a new open study: So, in which literary period are we in? (Wallace 5678). What Nicolas Bourriaud suggests is that we should feature the contemporary society as a globalized place where cultural nomadism and language changes coexist (Wallace 5680). For that matter, throughout these past few years, there has been a lot of uncertainty as to which new ‘-ism’ could describe our society (Southward 73). In fact, the concept of modernism has been pluralized into different modernisms, which are preceded by divergent prefixes (James and Seshagiri 88). Is this new literary era digimodernism, automodernism, post-postmodernism, altermodernism, or metamodernism? (Wallace 5680).

Some academics consider we are living in a new ‘altermodern’ culture (Verhagen 804), explained by Bourriaud as a “synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism” (Wallace 5679). Yet, the youngest generation of scholars suggest applying the term ‘metamodernism’ (Bargár 4). According to the Greek-English Lexicon, ‘meta’ means ‘with’, ‘between’ and ‘beyond’, which helps understand that metamodernism is epistemologically related with postmodernism, ontologically with postmodernism and in historical terms beyond postmodernism (Vermeulen 20). Both postmodernism and metamodernism share an opposition to reason, utopism, formal purism, among others (Wallace 5680). Reason is featured as limited, as metamodernism deals with subjects

which reason cannot clarify, such as “a flickering light, a sadomasochistic relationship, a man wearing sunglasses at night, a blind man who can somehow see...” (Wallace 5686).

Scholars have characterized this new literary period as an oscillation between the modern and the postmodern, enthusiasm and irony, continuity and discontinuity, hope and melancholy, unity and plurality... It takes the idea of the *construction* from modernism to that of the *deconstruction* from postmodernism, which will not evolve into a balance, but more into an oscillator that leads to a *reconstruction* (Bargár 7). Therefore, it can be argued that most postmodern tendencies have not been entirely lost, but they have been given new perspectives and directions (Wallace 5680). As exposed before, this has been caused by the endless social, cultural, political, and economic changes our world is nowadays experiencing, also including the significant impact of technologies into our present-day society, which have required an immediate “restructuring of the political discourse” (Wallace 5681). More specifically speaking, the metamodern novel uses its own forms of adjustment-style towards the globalization process, social relationships, science...; at the same time as it adjusts to the author’s thoughts and to its contemporary target public (Masters 975).

Considering that humankind pretends to progress both politically and morally, although they actually do not do so, it could be explained that metamodernism “moves for the sake of moving”, aiming a truth that it will impossibly be achieved (Wallace 5681). In fact, in metamodernist writings, clear connections with neoromanticism can be observed (Wallace 5684). Romanticism is based on “unity and multiplicity, beauty and ugliness, strength and weakness, individualism and collectivism, purity and corruption, revolution and reaction, peace and war, love of life and love of death” (Wallace 5684). Therefore, as explained in terms of metamodernism, Romanticism also combines opposing pairs. This provokes a sense of ambiguity together with that of mystery and unfamiliarity (Wallace 5686). Metamodernism includes the energies of its previous literary generations, as that of Kazuo Ishiguro, while it keeps the awareness of modernist writers, for instance, Virginia Woolf (James and Seshagiri 93).

Overall, metamodernism can be generally understood as a combination of order and disorder, by blending the framework of the present with that of “a future presence that is futureless”. At the same time, it moves the limits of “our place with those of a surreal

place that is placeless”. All these features could be considered the actual fate of the metamodernist characters, which deal with looking for “a horizon that is forever receding” (Wallace 5688).

As contemporary novelists start to emerge, a new idea of revolutionary fiction appears within the latest literary innovations. Some writers included in this group are Julian Barnes, J. M. Coetzee, Ian McEwan, Cynthia Ozick, Will Self and Zadie Smith (James and Seshagiri 87), being the following some of the best well-known literary writings of this new uncertain literary era: Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending* [2011], Zadie Smith’s *NW* [2012] and Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* [2013] (James and Seshagiri 89), as well as Ali Smith and her *Seasonal Quartet*.

2.2. The reception of Ali Smith’s novels

Ali Smith is a Scottish author, playwright and academic. She published her first book in 1995, *The Free Love and Other Stories*, which is a collection of twelve short stories, later assigned the Satire First Book of the Year award and the Scottish Arts Council Book Award. From then on, she has been writing until today, publishing twenty-two works, including novels and collections of short stories. The number of awards she has won is immense, which highlights the potential and good reception behind the novels she writes.

The latest novels written by Smith make up what is known as the *Seasonal Quartet*: *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), *Summer* (2020); and their follow-up novel *Companion Piece* (2022).

The reception of these novels has generally been positive among literary critics and readers alike. In our current world, whenever a book is well received by both critics and readers, it is then shortlisted for different literary awards. In the case of Ali Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet*, *Autumn* was shortlisted for the 2017 Booker Prize, *Winter* for the 2018 Orwell Prize, *Spring* for the 2019 Booker Prize and *Summer* for the 2020 Orwell Prize.

In fact, *Summer* won the Prize for political fiction, by which a judge shared that “The conclusion to Ali Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet* seals her reputation as the great chronicler of our age. It will serve as a time-capsule which will prove to be essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the mood of Britain during this turbulent time” (Schaub 1). Not only this, but other critics agree that “it is remarkable to be alive at the same time as Scottish writer Ali Smith” (LeBlanc 1).

On another note, in an interview, Ali Smith explained her doubts in how her *Seasonal Quartet* would be received by the public. She supports her project by saying that the choice of telling old and new stories helps transcend in time. Smith relates this passing of time with the titles of her Quartet, as that is what seasons also do: “they’ve all happened before, been and gone, and at the same time every time they happen it’s for the first time” (Juanico Llumà). This testimony makes reference to the turmoil expressed in the novels, that it may be gone but it will return some time, and with it, the need to read these novels again.

Furthermore, research also shows that there is no doubt that the reception has been positive. Literary specialists have started to work on analysing these novels, which reflects the interest they have caused not only among common readers, but also among experts. So as to give an example of the type of studies being carried out, we could now mention the BA thesis by Charlotte Duistermaat analysing the consequences of Brexit by focusing on an after-Brexit UK in Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet*. Duistermaat summarises that “Smith does not judge either Leave or Remain voters, but [...] she calls for more openness towards each other, instead of fear and violence” (Duistermaat 25). At the same time, literary specialists have also written journal articles dealing with Ali Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet*, as Johannes Wally’s article “The Return of Political Fiction?”, where he establishes a comparison between the approach of the electoral victory of Donald Trump in Howard Jacobson’s *Pussy* (2017) and the Brexit vote in the UK in Ali Smith’s *Autumn* (2016). The article focuses on studying the identity crisis of those who have seen themselves jeopardized by their country’s political situation (Wally 63). Newspapers have also chosen to present different opinions about Ali Smith’s writing with interviews such as *The Guardian*’s. Therefore, studying the most recent novels of Ali Smith, the *Seasonal Quartet* and *Companion Piece*, is a trend which has just started.

However, the most common receptions of these novels can be found on the great community of social media. It is known that social networks provide numerous popular opinions and receptions, as they are easily approachable for everyone. In the case of books, by posting a photo with comments about the reading, social media is contributing to showing a plurality of voices. Not only do literary critics reflect a wide knowledge about novels, but with the new technology, popular opinions have gained power and social media are currently considered one of the most checked sites by the public before starting to read a book. As the novels chosen are very recent and receive a very immediate public response, social media captures this popular reception previously mentioned. In Instagram, for example, various opinions about the *Seasonal Quartet* and *Companion Piece* navigate through different profiles, hereunder highlighting some of the most significant ones.

To start with, we get a great number of testimonies expressing that they were told not to read the *Seasonal Quartet* due to its difficulty, but once they did, they were totally amazed by the novels. A perfect example could be Julia's testimony [@julia_flyte]: "Instagram has brought a number of writers [...]. But there is probably none that surprise me more than Ali Smith because I spent many years adamant that she was NOT FOR ME".

However, some readers are very clear with what they think about the novels, just as Kayli is [@kcraymondreads], "I have so much love for the *Seasonal Quartet*. Not to be dramatic, but it is a tragedy that I'll never be able to read these for the first time again; however, I'm on a mission to read every book Ali Smith has ever written". Despite this direct testimony, Kayli also recognises the not-so-usual writing style Ali Smith uses, understanding that these novels will not be equally acclaimed by all readers: "I don't think these books are for everyone, and Ali Smith's writing may be an acquired taste as she is the master of rule breaking".

Other readers judge Smith in terms of her literary movement and writing speed. Robin Rimbaud [@robinrimbaud] claims that "you almost can't imagine literature to be as very contemporary as this even is" and gets surprised by the little time that took her to write the novels.

Concerning *Companion Piece*, readers have also shown a warm reception to the construction of this novel, claiming what Anastasia [@books.period] said: "It might look

like a book but it's also my anxiety pill", showing how reading this book has given her the power to reduce her daily life stress. Furthermore, she argues that she thought the *Seasonal Quartet* did not need to be followed-up by another novel, but once she read *Companion Piece*, she could not have imagined the Quartet without it.

There is a minority of readers who disagree on the warm reception the novels have received. Abbie [@ab_reads] doubts the integration and perfection of the novels considering that she was writing about the UK's situation while UK was experiencing it, "So how late into her writing process was she making edits to include the pandemic? Some parts seemed like last-minute edits".

As a whole, although the writing style of Ali Smith is complicated, the reception is generally positive, which makes the novels stand out from others and be gladly welcomed. This reception is well-summarized by Charlie Edwards-Freshwater [@thebookboy], "A unique experiment and one that I think solidifies Ali Smith as one of the most exciting voices in British literature today even if her style is definitely not for everyone".

To conclude this section, Ali Smith's latest works are still in their nascent stages, and much more research is needed so as to appreciate and understand the rich themes and complexities of these novels. Thus, it is probable that future scholarships will deepen on studying these unique novels.

3. Analysis of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*

Ali Smith has contributed to the contemporary literary panorama with her *Seasonal Quartet* [*Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), *Summer* (2020)] and its follow-up novel *Companion Piece* (2022).

Having presented in the opening section a tentative explanation of the literary period we are in, I am going to work with the premise that Ali Smith's novels are metamodernist texts, sharing many, though not necessarily all of the above-mentioned characteristics.

The fact that Ali Smith's novels are difficult to classify, connects the author with 'metamodernism'. In fact, Smith herself has been featured as one of the most quintessential metamodern writers (Masters 980). This is partly due to her original narrative techniques. In Smith's seasonal novels, language choices are made by the different cerebral frames that can be found, as showing didactic commentaries on characters and allusions to real-world politics (Masters 985). Ali Smith makes use of subclauses, parentheses, colons, numerous coordinating words ('but', 'or', 'so' or 'if') and a particular grammar that represents different ways of thinking, such as hesitation and intensification (Masters 985). Besides, Ali Smith is constantly seeking for a regeneration of prose, formal adventure and an adjustment of modernism to the present times in order to reactivate these features in her novels (James and Seshagiri 96). Therefore, reading Smith's novels is a total experience of self-adjusting to a new grammar, new structures and new ways of expressing feelings. Discontinuity is what marks the perception of Ali Smith's novels, as the readers can feel both a sense of connection and of foreignism (Masters 987). LeBlanc argues that Ali Smith captures the contemporary nightmare in an imaginative way and with hints of absurdity. However, this critic does not only focus on the *Seasonal Quartet*, but on the quartet's follow-up novel *Companion Piece*, a perfect reflection of the anxieties of society (LeBlanc 1). Therefore, many readers and critics appreciate Smith's unique voice and innovative approach to the storytelling of our present-day affairs.

The novels do not have a traditional linear plot, but they are more concerned with exploring the relationship between characters and how they react to contemporary events. Each novel takes place during the season of its title and the topics that were relevant at that time of the year, such as the refugee crisis in the winter of 2017, or Covid-19 in the

summer of 2020. Therefore, the novels revolve around the topics that have happened in the historical context of an after-Brexit UK.

Autumn (2016) explores the relationship between Daniel, 101-year-old man, and Elisabeth, a 32-year-old woman. The novel follows their conversations and memories as they confront the effects of Brexit, while highlighting the importance of connection and empathy in an uncertain world.

Winter (2017) centers around a dysfunctional family meeting at Christmas. Mother Sophia and son Art, brought together by Sophia's sister (Iris) declining health, struggle to connect with each other. Art takes Lux home with him, who Sophia and Iris believe to be Art's girlfriend, Charlotte, who is paid to pretend to be so. *Winter* reflects on the complexities of human relationships and the need of understanding in a divided world.

Spring (2019) follows the unlikely friendship of Richard, an old man, and Brittany, a young woman who works at an immigration center. As spring blooms, the novel celebrates the topics of art and connection in a world which is in constant change and renewal.

Summer (2020) explores the lives of several characters, including that of a teenage girl Sacha and her brother Robert, as they navigate the agitated summer of 2020, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests of the Black Lives Matter. Once more, *Summer* meditates on the changing contemporary society.

Lastly, *Companion Piece* (2022) narrates the story of Sand, an artist living through what appears to be the first lockdown. Sandy's father is hospitalized, and she wants to remain distant from social life. An old friend from school, Martina becomes involved in Sand's life in spite of Sand's worries about COVID-19. The novel deals with characters trying to understand what is happening around them, at the same time as those events are happening.

Having briefly introduced the content and the characters of the five novels under analysis, the simplicity of the plot can be related to repeating the same character in different novels. Not only did Smith chose non-complex stories, but she also used recurring characters to create a cyclical atmosphere for the readers. Some examples could be that Daniel and Elisabeth appear both in *Autumn* and *Winter* or Art and Lux in *Winter* and *Spring*,

although there are many more overlaps between the novels. With this intention in mind, Smith is creating a sense of connection and continuity between the novels and a sense of interwoven narrations which extend across the five books.

Ali Smith can be described as a post-Brexit writer, being the *Seasonal Quartet* a perfect approach to this new era for the UK (Duistermaat 6). In fact, *Autumn*, her first seasonal novel, is widely featured as the first post-Brexit novel (Preston 1), making Ali Smith part of the discussion of this, at the moment, uncertain situation. While ambiguous and contorted, Smith seems to present the UK at odds with itself, a country in constant change. This could be aligned to the titles of the *Seasonal Quartet*, as seasons are periods of changes, just what we get from one book to another. As we turn over the pages, by means of depicting seasonal changes, the UK changes as well.

It is widely known that there have been numerous overlapping crises that have been constantly damaging Western democracies during the 21st century. These may include the financial crisis, terrorism, radical actions from the right-wing, humanitarian disasters such as immigration, natural and environmental disasters, technological crisis and pandemics, namely the latest one, Covid-19 (Keen 27). Politically speaking, a key issue in the UK is that their democracy has been accused of being too secretive about science, privileging some citizens over others, excluding workers, healthcare professionals... (Keen 29). Political activism has been decreasing since 2001, however, the question is, has Brexit boosted this so called decline of democracy in the UK?

Connected to Brexit, the topic of immigration plays a big role in Ali Smith's novels, at the same time as other events the UK has lived. For instance, we can include within these topics the Covid-19 pandemic, the new world of technologies, and lastly, the generational gap of the 21st century.

Before analyzing Ali Smith's position towards these topics, it should be mentioned that she experiments with metamodern techniques (as well as themes) in her novels, by including a collage-like structure, by which different characters and narrators continuously interchange and alter the past and present, at the same time as including numerous intertextual references (Duistermaat 8).

Having these features in mind, we will be analyzing which ideas and beliefs Ali Smith contemplated in these novels, together with where she positions herself within the topics approached: Brexit, immigration, Covid-19, modern technology and generational gaps.

3.1. Brexit: are we going nowhere?

Brexit is the name given to the UK's referendum with the aim of voting to leave the European Union in 2016. It is the contraction of "Britain" and "exit". Igwe explains that a referendum is normally caused by a lack of satisfaction with a country's politics, in other words, by a crisis of democracy (69). Ali Smith exemplifies this dissatisfaction along the five novels analyzed.

In her novels, Brexit appears to have been empowered by protective national ideas, meaning that the UK did not want to share the troubles of other countries just because they were part of the European Union.

The so-called vote, his mother says, was a vote to free our country from inheriting the troubles of other countries [...] (*Winter* 206)

The UK's referendum resulted in leaving the EU. 49% of the Leavers affirmed that the main reason for their choice was that "decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK". On the contrary, the Remainers, 43%, claimed that "the risks of voting to leave the EU looked too great when it came to things like the economy, jobs and prices" (Igwe 70). Ali Smith explains that there was a big disparity of opinions in the whole country.

All across the country, people felt it was the wrong time. All across the country, people felt it was the right time [...] All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing. (*Autumn* 59)

These opposite opinions even broke families. In *Summer*, this situation is presented as a contradiction, as the ones who voted 'remain' actually had to 'leave' the house where they lived. Smith even refers to this as if the people who "voted leave were sort of issuing a command" (*Summer* 81).

Our father voted remain and our mother voted leave. But that it's our father who, in the end, was the one who literally had to. Leave. (*Summer* 80)

Not only families were broken, but the UK's citizens hope of a fair future for the country and a structured and reliable government also disappeared, as is expressed by some of Smith's characters:

I'm tired of the news [...] I'm tired of the meanness. [...] I'm tired of liars [...] I'm tired of lying governments. (*Autumn* 56)

UK's confidence in parliament has nearly halved since 1990, as by March 2023 only 24% of British citizens agreed on the UK's decision to leave the EU, while 49% reflected a total disappointment. These figures show that the UK is least likely to trust their government and parliament than many other countries such as France, Germany, Australia, Iran or China (Booth). Booth also examines a graphic in which 24 countries have been tested in terms of confidence in the press, UK resulting to be in the 23rd position. This highlights the complete loss of trust on the country.

UK's citizens did not only lose trust, but they even considered, and actually did move away from their mother country.

All across the country, people looked up Google, *what is EU?* All across the country, people looked up Google: *move to Scotland*. All across the country, people looked up Google: *Irish passport applications*. All across the country, people called each other cunts [...]. (*Autumn* 59)

That total dissatisfaction with leaving the EU was fully perceived in the Remainder's side, as they were against separating from the unity of Europe.

Her mother points to the words European Union at the top of the cover of the passport and makes a sad face. (*Autumn* 195)

Ali Smith continuously exemplifies the present disappointment with UK's politics by means of a metaphor. Light is presented as faith, and if people lose it, they lose the remaining hope they have.

Up to today, he had never truly understood [...] The light is leaving. It is leaving Robert's face. (*Summer* 102)

Despite this, not everyone in the UK lost their faith on how to stay strong in this fatale situation. For some people, forgiveness was the hand needed to be hold at that point in order to leave behind the disasters that once occurred and still occur in the world. However, these utopian thoughts did not, in the end, last long.

It can be argued that these declarations could represent that Brexit was a response to a dissatisfaction with EU's democratic policies, as for example those related to the "unchecked EU migration/free movement system" in all countries (Igwe 71). Smith repeatedly explores the connection between Brexit and its consequences for immigration.

They made their choice [...] people from the EU being made to wait to see if they can stay in the country or not [...] They ran that risk. It is not our responsibility. (*Winter* 54)

Britannica rules the waves. First we'll get the Poles. And then we'll get the Muslims, then we'll get the gypos, then the gays. You lot are on the run and we're coming after you. (*Autumn* 197)

Brexit, on the contrary, fought for the interests of British citizens over those of the immigrants (Igwe 71). In *Spring*, Smith presents thoughts related to the desire of following principles of 'zero tolerance' (4).

Europa Press posted that Theresa May, Prime Minister of the UK after the Brexit referendum, fought for twelve objectives that could result from the Brexit negotiation. Some of the objectives aimed at a stronger and fairer country, new commercial agreements, and a unique and sole market. The UK definitely wanted to leave behind all previous politics and negotiations.

Some of these negotiations appear in *Companion Piece*, where Ali Smith exposes some political and administrative changes occurring in the UK in 2022. After Brexit, non-UK's citizens started not to be allowed to freely travel into the country. This situation was even more noticeable for the EU, as IDs were no longer valid, but passports were compulsory. In the case of people 'without papers', they were strictly examined and penalized. In the novel mentioned, such a situation is pictured at an airport, where the protagonist, Martina Inglis, assures she has two passports for dual citizenship. However, the man working at the border control suspected this case.

He took the other passport from her [...] looked at the two passports together [...] and she realized there were now two masked officials in uniform standing very close to her [...] (*Companion Piece* 7)

Martina was asked many questions concerning her reasons for travelling to the UK and was even moved to an empty room.

They tried to move her to what they called the interview room. (*Companion Piece* 9)

Had this been a short time, it would not have been seen as a major problem. Yet, the border's men forgot about her for a long time.

Either they put me in there and honestly forgot about me or they forgot about me on purpose. [...] But seven and a half hours. In a soulless room. (*Companion Piece* 11)

This is just one example of the big disestablishment Brexit caused to the whole country and to its visitors.

Smith tries to convey the idea that these thoughts and later actions are heartless. In *Winter*, Lux, the protagonist who is against the decision of Brexit, explains this situation to Mrs Cleves, the mother of Arthur, the male protagonist of the novel.

Human beings have to be more ingenious than this and more generous. (*Winter* 206)

The discrimination Brexit caused was both mental and physical, as fences and walls were built to delimit the British citizens' territories and those of the foreigners.

But what will the world do, Mrs Cleves, Lux says, if we can't solve the problem of the millions and millions of people with no home to go to or whose homes aren't good enough, except by saying go away and building fences and walls? (*Winter* 206)

In *Spring*, Smith even mentions the bad spirit of UK's Leavers at that moment (67), as if good people did no longer exist in the country, as if they had all dissolved, in other words, disappeared.

In the great community of readers in the social media *Instagram*, there are profiles who verify the intentions of Ali Smith in the writing of the novels up to analysis. Bearing in mind the opinion of Nicola [@readers.digress], the season of *Spring* is normally seen as a period of rebirth, whereas the novel is a total disheartening entry. This provokes the novel to be "a time capsule of our lives".

3.2. The immigration conundrum

Immigration has always been a possible option for people who sought for a better job and life situation. *Winter* explores this issue with Lux's frustration with the UK's situation.

What's wrong with people wanting better lives? Lux says. (*Winter* 206)

As explained in the previous section, Brexit and immigration go hand by hand as controlling immigration from Europe was one of the main appeals of Brexit (Igwe 71).

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. (*Spring* 3)

Ali Smith points out that the UK citizens thought immigrants stole their jobs, which was an immediate cause for the decision to vote in the Brexit referendum.

They're coming here because they want our lives. (*Winter* 206)

Different measures were accepted so as to control immigration in the UK. Ali Smith provides some examples of this in *Spring*.

Detention is the key to maintaining an effective immigration system. (*Spring* 167)

It is claimed that the UK's referendum "functioned as a green light to accelerate racist and xenophobic brutality" (Gertz 2). *Take Back Control* was the slogan used against any possible immigration, which was seen by the British as a loss of national rules in favor of European ones. That is why Ali Smith constantly recalls nazis in her novels, to represent the anger and the racist deeds provoked by the Leavers.

What we need is panic [...] We need a hashtag #linedrawn [...] Good nazi is good paedo [...] We need them to think we can get to them get the word *lynching* to anyone not white [...] (*Spring* 4)

Expressed differently, foreign citizens had no other option but to move from the UK to their home country.

There's a boy [...] whose father is French and has a restaurant, a good one, [...] and they are leaving, they have to leave. (*Summer* 81)

The issue of immigration damaged all EU migrants, approximately 3.7 million in 2019, who had moved to the UK as well as the recruitment system (Igwe 71). Ali Smith explains in her writings that if laws punished their entrance to the country, they had nothing to do.

I'd heard how more new laws were on their way to stop anyone who asked for refuge in this country. (*Companion Piece* 29)

However, in 2023 the number of illegal immigrants has grown compared to 2016. Regarding EU tourists, they can only stay in the UK for a maximum of six months without any required visa. If longer, a specific visa is requested. However, working and living agreements are not easy to obtain, as tourists may be asked for any required documentation to test their veracity (Igwe 79).

Smith explores the idea that documents without a photo are seen as fake. In *Spring*, Brittany Hall, a young woman who is a resident at a detention center in Scotland struggles to have her photo taken for her ID card.

What I mean by the face is the face on this A4 photocopy, the proof I exist. Without it I officially don't. Even though I am bodily here, without this piece of paper I'm not. (*Spring* 125)

In fact, this type of document serves this character as a way of proving that she is not originally from the UK, so that she cannot work there, nor live.

I exist because this piece of paper with my face on it proves I'm not able to study here or work here or live here without permission or earn any money here. (*Spring* 125)

In this same book, there is a poetic comparison made between swifts (the birds) and immigrants. This metaphor suggests a common sense of movement, migration, and adaptability. The birds in the novel are portrayed as free and instinctual, which can navigate between borders with ease. Meanwhile, the immigrants represent the situation they had at the moment in the UK, facing restrictions and challenges. However, they also possess an analogous sense of adaptability and resilience, searching and finding their destiny in unfamiliar cities.

Soon their babies will be doing push ups in the nesting place with their wings, strengthening themselves for their long flight back to Africa. (*Summer* 250)

With this sentence, Ali Smith is beautifully comparing the travelling of birds with those of immigrants, who are obliged to leave the UK and 'fly back' to another country, in this case Africa.

In the following quotation, the narrator implies that immigrants are like wanderers, they move from one country to another without having a permanent place. Many immigrants have left the country because of the deteriorating situation of their homeland.

When they fledge and leave the nest it's the first time that they actually fly anywhere, and as soon as they hit the air they won't touch down again for a least a year, more usually a couple of years.
(*Summer* 250)

At the same time, in *Summer* Smith also refers to people who are kind with immigrants. Again, a comparison with birds is made. The bird represents kindness and freedom (379), and Smith then explains that the ones who help are then going to be helped and to receive that kindness back.

Lastly, it is important to mention another well-captured instance which Ali Smith describes in *Companion Piece*, a novel that describes in detail the after-Brexit and Covid situation the UK lived. After the re-encounter between Sand, the protagonist and Martina, an old college acquaintance, Martina's family invades Sand's house for no apparent reason. Sand's house invasion can be compared to immigrants invading a country.

When is your family planning to leave my house? You are a bunch of stupid self-interested wankers, that's my surfaces you're talking about. (*Companion Piece* 163)

Ali Smith adjusts her novels to different literary devices, in this case using a synecdoche, a feature shared with other metamodernist novels. Moving into a house that is your own stands for moving into a foreign country. Although Sand's character is a progressist thinker in favour of immigration, she is unhappy about people invading her house. This illustrates that hospitality has its limits, being for some people a country, and for others, their house.

And then, *all of you*. Go home. Please. (*Companion Piece* 155)

Ali Smith makes use of different writing styles in her novels in order to highlight what she considers key issues. In this sentence, 'all of you' and 'home' are written in italics, alluding to the topic of immigration more directly. In this way she problematizes the issue of immigration and hospitality.

3.3. A microscopic character involved: Covid-19

Within all human history, it can be said that the most worldwide spread virus has been the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, also called Covid-19 that gives name to the global pandemic which started in 2019 (Weinberg 1). Bearing in mind the date in which this started, it should be clarified that within the five Smith's novels under analysis, only two of them, *Summer* and *Companion Piece*, were written after Covid-19 narrating the effects of the pandemic in the UK.

In *Summer*, the characters argue the possibilities the Chinese had of causing such a disaster, doubting its veracity. Chinese people are known for eating uncommon animals, which pass their viruses onto the human bodies, idea reflected through one of the characters in *Summer*.

According to the net people got it from eating snakes. Other places say bats and pangolins. Stuff has gone viral online about Chinese people eating little yellow snakes on skewers. (*Summer* 40)

Sacha, another one of the protagonists of *Summer* cannot bear how someone would eat these animals, and therefore, she slightly disagrees with the supposed origin of the pandemic.

Why would anyone want to eat a snake? [...] Unless the eating snakes thing is a racist way to link the virus to racism and being used as a slur against Chinese people [...] Anyway it came from eating wild animals. (*Summer* 40)

Thus, Smith shows that blaming Chinese people for the creation of Covid-19 can be seen as a racist conduct. This consideration is emphasized later on in the novel by Robert's mother.

You know what a skunk is [...] God help us, probably someone somewhere is eating one right now and starting a new Asian virus. (*Summer* 94)

On another note, Covid-19 causes respiratory problems and many other symptoms on the individual infected, which can even cause death in not so extreme cases (Weinberg 1). Everyone, no matter the age, race, or condition, could get infected from this virus. Smith portrays this rapid expansion as if it was a dominoes' effect: if one gets ill, so do the ones close to that person.

She died. So did twelve other people in the home she was in, over one weekend, and a careworker, and the healthworker who saw the careworker, who had symptoms [...] (*Summer* 245)

Consequently, the different national governments agreed on accepting a law which obliged citizens to wear face masks. This situation is depicted by Smith in her novels, even when people were not in favour of this new rule.

Have you got masks? Absolutely not, the CELINE twin said. We've nothing to hide. (*Companion Piece* 88)

In *Summer*, Smith makes a comparison between seagulls and masks. Sacha, one of the protagonists, contrasts the beak of a seagull with the masks worn in Venice in the plague. This comparison enables Sacha to then state the differences of those masks and Covid-19 masks.

Not only does Smith present the usage of physical masks in order to prevent getting infected, but she also introduces this character to compare those masks with metaphoric masks. Sacha argues that Covid-19 masks are not just physical-colored masks, but invisible masks which protect the country's politicians.

She thinks of those little cotton facemasks of now. They're like nothing at all, dead leaves, blowaway litter, compared to the real masks, the ones of the faces of the planet's liars (*Summer* 41-42)

Therefore, the reader may infer that the politicians use those 'masks' so as not to show the real situation of the country.

Everything needs to be unmasked, right now. (*Summer* 43)

Yeah, but what's said about what's happening and what's really happening are often quite different things. (*Companion Piece* 87)

However, the restrictions passed by the governments, including lockdown, also caused mental health problems in most of the population (Suryasa 2). These psychological issues are explored in some characters' behaviours in *Summer*.

He drives me crazy, particularly right now because he hates lockdown so much. (*Summer* 118)

Smith also aims to present the disconcerting situation people lived stuck at home. She examines what people did in the meantime, not much apart from looking through the window and watching birds fly. Once again, a symbol in the novels. In *Summer*, Sacha

presents a hopeful thought whenever she sees a bird fly, as those things are the ones that “kept her sane in this time when we are all in lockdown” (121).

The UK government followed the notion of herd immunity to mitigate the pandemic, aiming at a below one rate of secondary infections (Keen 29). Politicians from right-wing political parties even blamed immigrants for being the cause of the UK’s manifold infections (Keen 31). However, UK’s rules did not result positively, as the country’s death rate per capita was ranked in third place compared to the rest of the countries of the world (Keen 30). Consequently, Ali Smith shows through the plot of *Summer* the UK’s Government decisions, as in the early days it did not allow caretakers wear neither masks nor gloves.

She bought herself some masks on Amazon [...] She has to put them on secretly at the front door because her work bans the carers it employs from using anything [...] (*Summer* 325)

Art, one of the characters, explains that the Government wants everyone to be equally in danger, no matter who they visit, whether they are infected or not (*Summer* 325).

Due to these actions, a big percentage of UK’s citizens were unsatisfied with the Government’s decisions, and they stopped trusting politicians in general, they stopped believing in democracy. Consequently, an enormous sense of rebellion was awoken in some citizens, which also lowered the number of people using face masks and of people getting vaccinated (Weinberg 2). *Companion Piece* analyses this discontent when one of the characters, Celine, expresses her thoughts about Covid-19.

Covid’s over, the CELINE twin said. The government says. [...] We’re not ill. (*Companion Piece* 87)

However, Smith is careful to show the different opinions expressed at that moment in the country as not everyone shared the same opinion. Going back to the moment in *Companion Piece* in which Martina’s family invades Sand’s house, we can regard it as a passage with a double meaning.

When is your family planning to leave my house? You are a bunch of stupid self-interested wankers, that’s my surfaces you’re talking about. (*Companion Piece* 163)

We have considered that this passage metaphorically deals with immigrants invading a country, however, taken literally, it talks about Covid. It presents how people are still

careful about masking and disinfection, and about choosing to maintain social distancing or choosing to let people into our lives. Sand's father is ill, and she prefers not to have any contact with people yet, so as not to infect him. Therefore, right when Martina's family moves into her house, Sand moves out as they wander around without any sanitary care, just the contrary of what she wants. Ali Smith is using a hyperbole to explain the sharp consequences Covid-19 caused, consequences that can be as problematic as being expelled from your own house.

3.4. Technology: the daring sibling

Modern technology brings us “the unprecedented power to access information and to communicate with one another” (Margolis 408). Ali Smith shows that before modern information technology, people sent postcards to communicate, while now they keep in touch with text messages, emails or Instagram (*Spring* 97). Before, people went to restaurants and paid in cash, but now they order food on Deliveroo or Just Eat with their Mastercards (*Spring* 102). Moreover, with a mobile phone, people can make voice calls, listen to music, text friends and family, get access to the Internet, take photos... In *Companion Piece*, Ali Smith explores the idea that technological devices could end up being our closest friends, as we never stay away from them, and it is their lives the ones which we worry most about.

Alexas. People often said their devices were comforting, like sort-of friends, maybe like those palm-sized Japanese games all the kids had twenty years ago where you had to press buttons when the devices beeped [...] and if you didn't press the buttons on time the 'life' in the device 'died'. (*Companion Piece* 28)

However, the Internet has spread a type of communication that boosts the citizen's distrust towards politics (Margolis 408). The more information one has, the more knowledge one is supposed to acquire. Ali Smith adds that although the Internet provides users with all the information they want, not all the information is real.

But let's face it, Google itself wasn't exactly true [...] completely virtual therefore not in any real way real life. (*Companion Piece* 25)

With the 2016 Brexit referendum, the debate about technology and about its impact on democracies has gained importance (Barrett, Dommett and Kreiss 523). This has occurred because of our perception of social media as tools that empower freedom of speech. In fact, non-users of technological devices feel “intimidated and anxious” towards technology (Vroman 157). Ali Smith is aware of these anti-technology individuals, as she reflects the anxiety technology could cause them.

I have a theory that he hears the word Internet and thinks the word internment. (*Summer* 144)

These people, and everyone else, could feel followed and controlled by the constant updates and uses of technology, as if they were created to disrupt their so new and calm life (*Summer* 322). In fact, the author also emphasizes how much we are losing from the lives of the people of older generations, as if in our present days we can only keep our memories stuck in our phones.

We want to know where you are right now. We want you to post images of what it is you’re looking at so you will remember this special moment always. [...] We want you to record your lives because your lives mean so much [...] (*Spring* 119)

In *Spring*, the Internet is explored as a way of making people do infinite things almost by force. At some point it is said that “we want you to send us a sample of your DNA and a sum of money so we can help you find out who you are [...] as a useful service to you” (*Spring* 120). This perfectly exemplifies the problematic consequences of making an inadequate use of technology, as people could pretend to be you (*Winter* 183), and the total control technology has on us as it knows everything about our personal lives including our genetical information. In fact, the passage finishes by saying “We want all of you” (*Spring* 123).

Despite the potential benefits of today’s technologies, there are still some people who are skeptical and choose not to use them. Consequently, if they deny reality, it is probable that they will be left behind.

What kind of person doesn’t book ahead on his phone? (*Spring* 25)

It should also be mentioned that Smith presents the generational gap that technology brings. Old people feel more disconnected to the technological world as they feel less capable of learning how to function technological devices. It is totally comprehensible,

as children have more capacities to acquire new knowledge easier and quicker, just the contrary to old people.

I am way old enough to read and comprehend books and things published on the net. (*Spring* 206)

Technology distances social relationships, shades clarity and damages confidence (Hertlein, et al. 7). All the technological advances are a direct consequence of globalization, which can lead to inequality, insecurity and interdependence (Milner 1097). Balancing the benefits and the disadvantages of involving oneself into the world of new technologies remains to be a crucial task (Milner 1110). This conflict between the unintended effects of modern technology and the need for humane society is one of Smith's main concerns in her novels:

Are we at mercy of technology or is technology at mercy of us? (*Winter* 51)

3.5. Intergenerational barriers

In the Brexit vote, the number of Remainers in the UK cities of London, Edinburgh and Glasgow was immense compared to other cities (Igwe 79). Furthermore, the majority of old voters voted to leave the European Union, whereas the majority of younger voters did not go in favour of Brexit (Igwe 77). These results echo the existent generational gap in the UK and the citizens' diversity on the cities mentioned (Igwe 77). This generational gap reflects a clear division between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren... Today's youngest generations do not want to obey their parents' rules or share anything with them. Social relationships are changing very rapidly and there are numerous reasons for this. Divorces, separations, mobile phones and social media, radical behaviours and conservative thinking are undoubtedly major causes of the appearance of intergenerational barriers (Sattar et al. 95). Nevertheless, the generation gap can be minimized with love, comprehension, nice attitudes... which could strengthen family bonds (Sattar et al. 96).

Autumn (2016) follows the relationship between a young woman called Elisabeth and her old neighbour Daniel, who lived during the fascist times in Europe in the 1930s. At different instances, the characters reflect opposed interests and perspectives of the world,

which are formed by their age difference and life experiences. Elisabeth struggles to find a place in the world and Daniel is a retired art critic who has lived very different epochs. The principal way of bridging the generational gap is by exploring the notion of art. While art connects Daniel to the past and makes the present worth it, Elisabeth is more concerned with contemporary art. On another note, the age difference also denotes a changing language and communication as the characters struggle to understand some of their references.

He probably can't speak very good English (*Autumn* 45)

Concerning the changing communication, Daniel also explains its effects, as he argues that words grow and are living organisms (*Autumn* 69)

However, no matter the difference in age, they call themselves friends, which is not being understood by everyone, considered by Elisabeth's mother as unhealthy and unnatural.

How is an eighty five year old man your friend? (*Autumn* 78)

Not only do Daniel and Elisabeth differ in conversational topics (wars, politics, art...), but when they play "games", such as inventing a story straightaway together, the topics Elisabeth starts to introduce are not proper for a young lady, being influenced by Daniel.

A man with a gun, Elisabeth said (*Autumn* 118)

Furthermore, Daniel tends to use outdated and obscure words uncommon for Elisabeth, which makes them have to work on the bridge that separates their lives. However, that is definitely not an obstacle for Elisabeth.

He's not frail [...] He's not old (*Autumn* 45)

Therefore, *Autumn* is a perfect clarification of the challenges that may appear between different generations. Daniel and Elisabeth have a very curious attachment as Elisabeth starts to feel a totally idealized love towards Daniel. Although they seem to have lived completely different lives, there is possibility in communication.

Following the same line, *Winter* also discusses the topic of the generational gap, which is represented by the relationship Lux, a young lady, and Art, an old man, have. Their age difference also explores different challenges, perspectives, attitudes towards life and love.

Wow you really are old-fashioned (*Winter* 73)

Similarly to *Autumn*, Art talks about topics completely ancient, as he compares his name (Arthur) with that of King Arthur, which Lux is completely ignorant about. In fact, Art is portrayed as a past that does not die. Although it is featured as “dead as a disappeared grammar” (*Winter* 87), the fact that he is still alive, makes every past event, still enlivening the world. Art’s character is a clear representation of the ongoing process of personal and cultural evolution, as well as the various ways in which the past keeps shaping the present and even the future.

Winter does not only explore the generation gap between a man and a lady, but also between a mother, Sophia, and her son, Art. Throughout the whole novel, we can see continuous disputes which distance their mother-son relationship, as their thoughts differ.

In *Spring*, the father versus daughter generational gap is reflected so as to explore how parents find difficulties in connecting with their millennial children. Richard, father of a millennial is featured as out of touch with the technological and contemporary world, struggling to understand the thoughts of younger generations. Richard even “dreams” of having a daughter he totally gets on with well.

[...] His imaginary daughter said (*Spring* 29)

Summer goes on the same line, as Sacha and her mother continuously argue, Sacha repeatedly despises her mother’s role as a parent.

What kind of a parent are you? (*Winter* 13)

At the same time, Ali Smith also repeats the old man versus young woman pattern used in *Autumn*. The old person is always a man, while the young is a woman. Smith may be trying to portray knowledge from the eyes of a man so as to fit his generation, as in the past women were not allowed to study or work. Daniel and Hannah also fall for each other explaining that no matter their age difference, if they have known each other right at this moment and they want to be together, they can dare to do so.

I really am me. And you really are you. But if we follow Einstein’s thinking and add together you plus me plus time time space. What does that all make? [...] It makes you and I more than just you or I, Hannah says. It makes us us. (*Summer* 197)

As a concluding novel, *Companion Piece* ties up the generation gap existent today. As explained at the beginning of the section, our society is generally considered to be

suffering from social distancing because of sanitary reasons or because of the introduction of new technologies. Hence, communication between families, generations and people in general is also getting, with time, lost. With this novel Smith is reminding all readers that those who walk in life alongside them are undeniably their companions. Those we cross but we do not know, the neighbour we say hello to every morning or our soulmate with whom we share our daily achievements. They are our companions no matter the sex, race or age difference. And that is exactly what *Companion Piece* is to the *Seasonal Quartet*, it rides on a different road but it is never far away from the Quartet. As Priyadarshini [@mockpaperscreens] writes on Instagram, “Hello, a word this book begins and ends with”.

4. Conclusions

Seasonal Quartet and its follow-up novel *Companion Piece* demonstrate Ali Smith's place in metamodernism. By using fragmentation in her narrative structures, varied punctuation, nearly non-existing plots and multiple perspectives Smith constructs the complex nature of our contemporary society, which is emphasized by giving importance to the content rather than the story itself. Moreover, Smith blends different styles with metafiction, which creates a sense of reflexivity inviting the readers to deeply engage with the novels at all points.

Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* and *Companion Piece* also provide a powerful commentary on the crisis of the British democracy. The analysis of these novels shows the exploration of topics such as the impact of Brexit on the UK and its citizens, so as to capture the changing nature of the complex after-Brexit era. Smith's novels also encourage empathy towards those who arrive to the UK seeking for a better life, due to the negative impact of Brexit on sharply limiting immigration. Analysing the novels has also helped focus on the drastic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the introduction of modern technologies into our daily lives. In fact, the novels highlight the need for human connection and understanding, regardless of age or status, which can be thought-provoking so as to overcome age difference barriers and differences between people in general. It is clear that Ali Smith's choices were just some representations of the effects of a changing country. However, following Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg Theory ("Ernest Miller Hemingway"), these novels do not expose everything the British citizens were experiencing. It is true that the UK's surface was, and still is, full of problems, but underneath, there is uncontrolled turmoil and fear which is difficult to echo as Ali Smith writes about the UK's situation while the country's events are happening.

Overall, Ali Smith showcases her distinctive writing style and her potential to show a vivid picture of the UK's political climate and the complexities of its contemporary society by means of a metamodernist lens. By analysing the UK's political and social situation, she is clearly challenging the need to face the severe changes of a country in the 21st century.

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