

Antiques as Signifier: Conflicting Mentality of Old People in the *BrexLit Autumn*

Peiyan Liang¹, Xiaohui Liang^{2*}

¹Student, School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, China

²Professor, School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, China

*Corresponding Author: Xiaohui Liang, Professor, School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, China

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ABSTRACT

In Ali Smith's much-acclaimed *BrexLit Autumn*, the heroine Elisabeth Demand and her neighbor Daniel Gluck have attracted many critics' attention as representatives of cosmopolitanism in opposition to the insular mindset of those who chose "Brexit." However, previous studies have neglected the complex characterization of Wendy Demand, Elisabeth's mother, and her fragmented national, social, and individual identities. In this context, based on Lacanian psychoanalysis and semiotics, this paper focuses on the characterization of Wendy from a particular perspective, that of antiques. It attempts to examine Wendy's interactions with antiques as a signifier of her inner conflicts and state of marginalization. It will demonstrate Wendy's hesitation between English and Scottish identities, her frustration with her fractured social network, and her pursuit of a socially accepted individual identity. It will reveal the particular role of antiques in this novel in disclosing the conflicting mentality of Wendy as a representation of the aging populace on the one hand and paradoxically of Scottish on the other hand during the time of "Brexit."

KEYWORDS: Ali Smith, Autumn, Wendy Demand, *BrexLit*, Brexit

INTRODUCTION

In the 2016 referendum on Britain's status in the EU, the choice of "Leave" won by a margin of 3.8%. Among all voters, the older generation was especially inclined toward "Brexit," driven by nostalgic memories of life before the E.U. and the influx of "outsiders" (Arnorsson & Zoega, 2018). Previous research indicates that "Brexit" was largely shaped by England, where "Leavers" prioritized the sense of English national identity, while over 60% of Scottish voters chose "Remain" (Henderson *et al.*, 2017, p. 13). Thus, elders and Englanders emerged as the groups most inclined to vote for "Brexit."

First published in 2016, *Autumn* by Scottish novelist Ali Smith is regarded as "arguably the first significant post-Brexit novel" (Shaw, 2018, p. 20). As the inaugural novel of the author's seasonal quartet, *Autumn* is set in the late summer and autumn of 2016, capturing the societal fractures and polarization caused by both the referendum campaign and the result of "Brexit." Previous studies on *Autumn* predominantly focus on its depiction of political and social tensions, addressing topics like immigration and national sentiment. Celia and Suci (2022), Adam

(2022), and Dobrogoszcz (2021) examine the contrasting public sentiments surrounding "Brexit" through voting patterns, while Heidemann (2020) explores societal divisions through the interplay between rural and urban landscapes. However, little attention has been given to Wendy Demand, the mother of the protagonist, Elisabeth Demand. As an old woman living in an English village where "Leave" is strongly advocated, Wendy is paradoxically a strong "Remainer" searching for a house in Scotland to avoid leaving the EU. Not a flat nor simplistic character, Wendy embodies a blend of sentiments from both sides of the political spectrum. Her nostalgia for a bygone Britain aligns her with the sentiments of "Leave," while her Scottish identity ties her to the ideals of "Remain," placing her in a state of inner turmoil reflective of the struggling Britons. Her contradictions, complexity, and seemingly conflicting image resemble a detailed image of the older generation in Britain.

For older Britons like Wendy, old objects made in Britain often evoke a sense of nostalgia. As Balthazar (2017) notes, for the elderly English populace, "objects not only represent a working-class and national past, and are

therefore connected to it metaphorically, but they are also part of the past and connected to it metonymically” (p. 222). In this light, many older people’s choice of “Brexit” was less about the E.U. itself and more about the national identity symbolized by old objects and antiques. Yet, given the clash of her Scottish heritage and the English environment she resides, Wendy Demand’s relationship with antiques cannot be reduced to such simplistic terms. Thus, using Lacanian psychoanalysis and semiotics, this paper will examine Wendy Demand’s complex relationship with antiques, exploring how these objects reveal her conflicting mentality across national, social, and individual identities. By analyzing her struggles and contradictions, this study seeks to better understand the torn older populace and discloses the societal ruptures of the “Brexit” referendum and its aftermath.

ANTIQUES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: NOSTALGIA AND FRAGMENTATION

Wendy’s nationality remains undisclosed in the novel but her Scottish identity is subtly hinted. Living in a community dominated by English identity, Wendy is split between societal Englishness and her Scottish heritage. This section will discuss her struggle to mediate a coordinated national identity through two key antiques in the novel: a 1962 Ordnance Survey map and a sovereign holder. It traces Wendy’s transition from attempting to fit into the English society to embracing her Scottish roots.

The relationship between England and Scotland has been historically delicate and fraught with tension. Anglicization placed Scottish identities at risk, as English cultural dominance left Scottish culture struggling for survival. “[A]lready in the early seventeenth century large parts of what would one day be imagined as Scotland were English-speaking and had immediate access to print-English” (Anderson, 2006, p. 90). During World War II, the unequal power dynamic between England and Scotland deepened. Despite Scotland’s significant contributions to the war effort, including shipbuilding and industrial production, it was rewarded with ongoing marginalization. As Finlay (1994) observes, during the interwar years, Scotland’s role in the British Empire diminished, with the region “ceas[ing] to be the ‘Workshop of the Empire’” (p. 106). The economic decline during the Great Depression further exposed the fragile nature of Scotland’s perceived partnership with England, prompting many Scots to reconsider the benefits of remaining within the British state.

This historical background of inequality and cultural tension mirrors the personal struggles Wendy faces. Though the novel does not explicitly state her nationality, clues suggest that Wendy and her daughter Elisabeth have distinct Scottish origins. Wendy mentions once that “she’s lived here nearly a decade now” (Smith, 2017, p. 54), without disclosing where the family moved from.

However, her frequent references to Scotland, her obsession with the Scottish child star Zoe, and the author’s Scottish background all strongly indicate their Scottish heritage. Despite living far from Scotland, Wendy still retains a deep-rooted Scottish patriotism at heart. When Elisabeth shows Wendy her new UK passport, Wendy focuses on Scotland’s representation on the passport, singling out Scotland with “a brace of continents” (p. 196). She has the opening of the Scottish Parliament saved on TV and watches it repeatedly, and insists her daughter do the same. Wendy even tears up at the display of the mace on the TV as she is emotionally connected to Scotland’s cultural and political identity. Yet, living in an English village, Wendy attempts to suppress her Scottish heritage to fit in, forcing herself to mediate her identity between the two nations. Antiques play a central role in this process, representing her swaying sense of national identity.

Wendy’s first antique purchase in the novel is a 1962 Ordnance Survey map of her current town, made shortly after she remarks on her invisibility within the community. As a signifier, antiques traditionally signify nostalgia for the lost kingdom and the desire to exclude “outsiders” from British soil (Balthazar, 2017). However, under Wendy’s possession, the map transforms. Instead of reflecting Britishness, it becomes a new signified shaped by Wendy’s personal narrative. This transformation aligns with Lacan’s idea of the “incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (Lacan *et al.*, 2005, p. 419). It generates the instability of meaning in the Symbolic. This instability creates a fundamental lack that structures the subject’s desire, expressed through the linguistic operations of the Unconscious.

Wendy purchases the map from “[t]he kind of shop with the kinds of things that look nice, cost more than they should and persuade you that if you buy them you’ll be living the right kind of life” (Smith, 2017, p. 54). She shops it for its Englishness, hoping it will help her fit in with the town’s elders and gain social acceptance. Yet, unlike other elderly people who have spent their whole lives in England, Wendy does not share their nostalgia for a more conservative kingdom in the past. For her, the map instead is a banal display of scientific facts with no sentimental resonance. Therefore, instead of preserving it like a devoted antique fanatic, Wendy nails the map to her kitchen wall and draws a new coastline over its original markings. In doing so, she turns the antique into a personal artifact. This symbolic attempt to rewrite her history addresses her lack of a concordant national identity which is still buried in her Unconscious.

In this way, the antique map becomes a reflection of Wendy’s personal identity struggles and a perspective through which she interprets broader societal changes. She later points out two specific spots on the 1962 map to

Elisabeth: the site where a World War II pillbox has recently sunk into the sea and the location of a newly erected fence. By adding these two details, she claims the former nationalistic signifier with a deeper, more intimate signified. The World War II pillbox signifies the time of World War II, a time of collectiveness for the British Empire and victorious battles. Its submersion, however, fills Wendy with a nostalgia of the unequal post-war treatment and the blatant marginalization, which symbolizes the loss of the “better times” of national unity. Meanwhile, the new three-meter fence with razorwire is another late change brought about at the time of “Brexit.” “[E]ncloses a piece of land that’s got nothing in it but furze, sandy flats, tufts of long grass, scrappy trees, little clumps of wildflower” (Smith, 2017, p. 55), the fence serves no practical purpose, existing solely as a marker of political and societal segregation caused by “Brexit.” Frustrated, Wendy demands her daughter do something about the nonsensical fence, demanding the younger generation to change the status quo. The two things Wendy reinterprets from the antique map show her uniqueness. Instead of going with the common sense that antiques reflect the past glory of the British empire, Wendy rejects the Big Other’s narratives, making antiques (the map) her own signifier of the changing political atmosphere and the fragmented kingdom.

The political sphere, dominated by the English “Leaver” with paintings of “the words GO and HOME” (Smith, 2017, p. 53), does not drain away Wendy’s Scottish identity or her choice of “Remaining.” When she meets Zoe at the antique show, the two Scottish women “bonded over a silver sovereign holder” (p. 198), joking about the size of sovereignty being small. This wordplay on “sovereignty” refers to both the sovereignty coin itself and the political sovereignty so highly prized by “Leavers” (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). For “Leavers,” antiques signify a longing for a sovereignty that has been lost with the influx of immigrants. However, the sovereignty coin, as reimagined by the two Scottish women, becomes a signifier for the diminished and outdated nature of British sovereignty, underscoring its ironic irrelevance in a modern, interconnected world. This signifying chain goes from the romanticized old British empire to the old coin with a shrinking value, only to end as the ridiculous laughingstock for the two women to “laugh so loud [they] spoiled a take in the next room” (Smith, 2017, p. 198).

The sliding of the two signifiers, the antique map and the sovereign holder, reflects Wendy’s pursuit of a national identity of her own. Through her interpretation of the map, Wendy shifts its signified from unity and nostalgia to fragmentation and exclusion. This resignification corresponds with Lacan’s notion that signifiers do not possess fixed meanings but slide within a signifying chain, generating new associations based on context and

subjective investment (Lacan *et al.*, 2005). Wendy’s unconscious reconfiguration of these signifiers reveals her alienation within the Symbolic order, as her Scottish identity and status as a “Remainer” conflicts with the dominant narrative of British sovereignty. Similarly, her playful reinterpretation of the sovereign holder with Zoe underscores Lacan’s assertion that signifiers gain meaning relationally, often through subversion. The term “sovereignty,” tied to Britain’s political grandeur, becomes ironic when Wendy and Zoe reduce it to the literal coin and joke about its insignificance. This act disrupts the authority of the Big Other—the symbolic system that dictates the supposed sanctity of national sovereignty—and exposes its fragility and obsolescence. In the two metonymical processes, “the signified slides away from signifiers and is always absent from signifiers, even though it is always suggested by them” (Pluth, 2007, p. 39), and causes a lack of belongingness in Wendy’s Unconscious. The lack initially prompts her into a fanatical obsession with the antiques. She seeks to root her national identity in antiques, as her English counterparts in town do. However, this lack cannot possibly be fulfilled because of her national difference from them—her Scottish upbringing—so she moves on in the later part of the novel with a mocking of the Big Other’s prohibition, shifting the desire for antiques to feel included to the desire for antiques to feel empowered.

The turning point for Wendy to completely abandon her attempts to be accepted in the English town is when Elisabeth shows her the new passport. The passport blatantly displays “Scotland and women and a brace of continents all well and truly in their place” (Smith, 2017, p. 196). Wendy vocally declaims against its design, showing a sad face at the words “European Union” on the cover, saying “I don’t want a new passport if it’s going to look like this” (pp. 195–196) and “If I’d seen this ridiculous thing that passes for a passport before the referendum... I’d have known to be ready well ahead of time for what was so clearly on its way” (p. 196). It is this exact moment that crystallizes her realization that she and Scotland could never match the mainstream voice because they both are marginalized within the framework of British identity, just as the passport’s design suggests. After she has gone on the TV show and seen in the flesh how the antiques are picked by the Big Other only for their commercial value and how the show has been staged, the passport is her last straw. Wendy decides to move back to Scotland, stating, “I’m still looking at properties up there” (p. 197), and fully embraces her Scottish identity. Letting go of her earlier attempts to assimilate into the English village, she chooses instead to affirm her Scottish heritage. No longer caught in the signified antiques previously presented to her, Wendy finds clarity in her disillusionment with the Big Other’s

constructed narrative of British unity and sovereignty with her redefining of the antiques.

ANTIQUES AND SOCIAL IDENTITY: RECOGNITION AND ALIENATION

As mentioned in the previous section, Wendy's struggle with her national identity is closely tied to the marginalization she faces as a Scottish woman in an English town. This marginalization extends to her social life, where "no one in the village speaks to her anyway or ever has though she's lived here nearly a decade now" (Smith, 2017, p. 54). In this section, Wendy's negotiation of her social identity through *The Golden Gravel*, an antiques-related TV show, will be inspected as the Lacanian Mirror Stage with antiques playing the role of the ideal-I and the Other.

Wendy's social circle consists only of her brief romantic flings, her daughter Elisabeth, and her neighbor Daniel Gluck. However, even Elisabeth, her closest familial bond and her biggest support in her social system, refuses to acknowledge Wendy's struggles in finding her own social identity. When Wendy expresses feeling ignored by the townspeople, Elisabeth dismisses her as "being a touch melodramatic" (Smith, 2017, p. 54), denying her mother's suffering for she is merely emotional. Thus, for Wendy, she has no way of establishing an intimate social relationship with the townspeople or with her family member. In this case, she has no real social contact as if living in a mental prison constructed by society's indifference. Wendy's social isolation parallels the infantile state in Lacan's Mirror Stage, where the subject sees their reflection for the first time and seeks approval from the Mother. "What is involved in the triumph of assuming [assumption] the image of one's body in the mirror is the most evanescent of objects, since it only appears there in the margins: the exchange of gazes, which is manifest in the fact that the child turns back toward the person who is assisting the child in some way, if only by being present during the game" (Lacan *et al.*, 2005, pp. 55–56). With no one understanding her, Wendy turns to antiques to establish her ego. First serving as the ideal-I, antiques allow her to associate herself with qualities she admires but cannot attain due to the social convention: unity, worth, and permanence. Over time, antiques take on the role of the Lacanian Mother, offering Wendy recognition and affirmation through their cultural and historical significance. Wendy's fixation on antiques, therefore, represents her attempt to reconstruct a coherent social identity in the absence of social connection.

Wendy's fascination with antiques begins when she first comes to know about *The Golden Gravel*, a TV show where celebrities and everyday people are invited to showcase their knowledge of antiques. Like films, TV programs employ similar scripted dialogues and filming strategies. When discussing the audience's gaze on films,

Mukherjee (2018) proposes that films evoke spectators' desires in their Unconscious. Watching *The Golden Gravel* as a spectator, Wendy projects her own desire onto the antiques presented in the reality show. Being old yet still discoverable and appreciated by society, antiques represent what Wendy aspires to be. Though acutely aware of the power imbalance in the show's production—where the members of the public cannot obtain privileges like riding in vintage cars—Wendy remains captivated. She still talks Elisabeth's ear off about the show, because the image reflected from the antiques is so enticing. Their emotional and monetary worth feels unattainable to Wendy, yet irresistibly alluring. Antiques become a signifier of belonging, desirability, and recognition, a signifier of being in the center of the stage, attributes what she craves but cannot find in her marginalized existence. For those antiques with commercial value, they are selected by experts and celebrities, with the belief that they could be sold well in an auction. Yet, even less "valuable" antiques can hold emotional worth in the eyes of the public. For instance, one participant purchases an old till (a vintage cash register), which, though out of service, could still evoke memories. "[I]ts bright white and red buttons bristling off the curved chest of it remind her, . . . of the regimental coat her grandfather wore when he was a cinema doorman in the 1960s" (Smith, 2017, p. 132). Watching the antique show is like watching herself through the mirror, with the ideal-I she wishes to achieve staring back at her on the TV. She experiences a "jubilant assumption [assumption] of [her] specular image" while "still trapped in [her] motor impotence and nursing dependence" (Lacan *et al.*, 2005, p. 76). This dynamic further alienates her from her fragmented reality, trapping her in a cycle of desire and unattainability.

While antiques in the TV programme reflect an ideal self that Wendy wishes for but can never attain, they are also the Mother, an external entity that provides her with validation and acceptance. On *The Golden Gravel*, she is offered a rare opportunity to be in the spotlight, to be heard and known by society, and to momentarily step into a position of authority. In Elisabeth's words, "[I]n a shop full of junk, somewhere among all the thousands and thousands of abandoned, broken, outdated, tarnished, sold-on, long-gone and forgotten things, there is something of much greater worth than anyone realizes, and the person we have chosen to trust to unearth it from the dross of time and history is you" (Smith, 2017, p.129). With her invitation to the TV programme, not only is she old and valuable like the antiques, she now goes one step further, assuming the role of authority capable of defining value and rewriting the antiques' stories. This shift allows Wendy to transition from being a passive object within the Symbolic—unrecognized and marginalized in her everyday life—to an active subject with the power to bestow value. However, this sense of empowerment is ultimately illusory. Wendy's authority on the show is

constrained by the Big Other: she is only winning the episode if the antique she selects sells for the highest price. Thus, in the end, her worth is still dictated by societal and symbolic structures.

Wendy's attempt to reclaim her social identity through antiques indicates the dual layers of Lacanian alienation she encounters, "through the mirror phase and the formation of the ego", and "through language and the constitution of the subject" (Homer, 2005, p. 24). This dual alienation defines Wendy's relationship with both herself and the external world, accomplished through her obsession with the antiques. In the Mirror Stage, Wendy identifies antiques as her ideal-I, which alienates her from her fragmented reality. She strives to embody the unity and worth they symbolize but can never fully achieve, with no way of actual self-realization for an elderly woman like her. At the same time, her participation in the Symbolic structures of the TV programme subjects her to the alienation of language, reducing her value to the Big Other's societal measures of recognition and success, in this case, the commercial value. This dual alienation highlights the inescapable tension between Wendy's imaginary self and the self constituted by external forces. This tension mirrors her broader struggle with marginalization and belonging, leaving her perpetually striving for an elusive social identity.

Wendy's inability to achieve a stable social identity is a by-product of her conflicting national identity. As a Scottish woman living in an English town, she is excluded from the Symbolic structures that could provide her with social recognition, leaving her in a state of isolation. When she turns and seeks affirmation from her daughter, their generational gap and different upbringing make it hard for Elisabeth to comprehend Wendy's plight. Deprived of both societal and familial validation, Wendy turns to antiques as a substitute for social relationships. By associating herself with objects embedded with cultural and historical significance, Wendy struggles to fit into the image of an average elder in the predominantly English town for social value and belongingness. However, the antiques, as her ideal-I, portray a figure she could never be, revealing her failed reconciliation of her personal aspirations in the existing societal framework. At the same time, antiques function as the Mother, offering her the illusion of validation and recognition by providing her the power she has never been given. While antiques temporarily provide Wendy with a means of negotiating her social identity in social isolation, this pursuit inescapably alienates her more within her mentality, painting an illusory image but failing to satisfy her need for a solid identity. This failure sets the stage for her eventual turn toward the pursuit of her individual identity, where she begins to question the societal systems that have confined her.

ANTIQUES AND INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY: TRANSGRESSION AND RECLAMATION

Living in a small English village, Wendy faces rejection of both her national identity and social identity, leaving her with rebuilding her individual identity as the last resort. This desire for an individual identity free of societal castration prompts her to reframe the once exquisite antiques as tools of resistance. Antiques become allies in Wendy's trenches, leading her to challenge the Big other and enabling her transgressive pursuit of jouissance, which is "a violent intrusion that brings more pain than pleasure" (Zizek, 2011, p. 79). This section will examine Wendy's journey to refind her individual identity, with antiques mediating her relationship with the Big other by transforming from objects of nostalgia to instruments of transgression.

Before joining the TV show, Wendy exists as a passive consumer of its narratives, "learning" (Smith, 2017, p. 135) from its stories while gaining momentary satisfaction and gratification. However, this process erodes her already barely nonexistent individual identity, reducing her to "the two ordinary people, who are wearing matching tracksuits to show that they're the ordinary people" (p. 132). As Wendy sinks deeper into the comforting cocoon of the programme's Symbolic framework, she remains unaware of the extent to which her identity is reduced to the faceless figure wearing identical tracksuits. Her realization dawns only after she goes on to *The Golden Gravel* and experiences firsthand the artificiality of its production. It is only then does she come to see that both the TV show and the antiques are mere representations dictated by the Big Other's Symbolic system. Thus, awakened, she refuses to act as if she has not met the antiques shop owner before just for the sake of the cameras, which in essence is a rejection of the Big Other's imposed narrative. By stubbornly refusing to comply, Wendy disrupts the Symbolic system, exposing its inauthenticity and asserting her integrity. Her defiance reflects a deeper awareness: just as the programme commodifies antiques into a symbol of prestige and nostalgia for the common people, it also reduces Wendy to a "track-suited ordinary person" devoid of individual personality. Wendy voices out her despair: "I just couldn't do it... It was so stupidly false. I was hopeless" (p. 221). This hopelessness comes along with the refusal marks the moment of her realization of symbolic castration, the structural lack that prevents the attainment of a unified self while simultaneously driving her desire for achieving the self she once desired. Yet, in her refusal to conform, Wendy also experiences something akin to jouissance. Her Symbolic transgression against the show disrupts the imposed narrative, producing a paradoxical pleasure. This pleasure does not stem from the rejection of castration but arises in her confrontation with Symbolic prohibitions. Her

actions briefly destabilize the Symbolic framework while simultaneously reaffirming its authority, offering fleeting satisfaction while simultaneously reinforcing the impossibility of achieving true *jouissance*. Despite this, the burst of emotion offers Wendy a moment of authenticity. It allows her to reject the commodified role assigned to her and to temporarily dissolve her desire to belong within the Symbolic framework. While this act of defiance only provides a near-encounter with *jouissance*, an enjoyment that arises from stepping outside the preordained roles dictated by the Big Other, it enables Wendy to carve out a space for a more authentic relationship with herself, free from the show's constraints.

Later, Wendy and Zoe reflect on their TV experience in a drug-induced reverie, fantasizing about an "antique symphony." This fantasy can be interpreted as their inability to confront the trauma of the Lacanian Real. The Real, as a realm of unmediated isolation and alienation, pushes Wendy and Zoe to retreat into fantasy. In their altered state, induced by the effects of the drugs, the antiques are in their true forms, stripped of commodified and distorted identities. This unconscious fantasy operates within the Imaginary, freeing the antiques from their commodified roles and symbolically reordering their identities. Whether labeled as "sold" or "discarded," "worth[y]" or "worthless [ness]," "real" or "reproduced" (Smith, 2017, p. 220), these objects reclaim their authentic voice, becoming expressions of their own histories and memories. By creating an imagined dissolution of value distinctions, Wendy and Zoe project their alienation and pain onto the antiques, unable to directly face the traumatic force of the Real. This moment of fantasy transforms antiques from passive commodities into active participants in Wendy and Zoe's journey toward self-discovery with voices that echo Wendy and Zoe's repressed desires. In this trance-like state, the antiques appear in their raw material form. The two Scottish women, similarly, exist without the weight of societal restrictions. This dreamlike moment, where the boundaries between "real" and "reproduced" dissolve, symbolizes Wendy and Zoe's desire to transcend the Symbolic constraints. Yet this imagined dissolution ultimately serves as a defense against the Real's traumatic force, highlighting their reliance on fantasy to maintain a fragile sense of coherence. This reliance intertwines with their unconscious pursuit of *jouissance*, as fantasy provides a structure through which satisfaction of the drive can operate. Fantasy, as Homer (2005) explains, "originates in 'auto-eroticism' and the hallucinatory satisfaction of the drive" (p. 86). Similarly, Pluth (2007) explains that "[j]ouissance is not simply the satisfaction of a need but the satisfaction of a drive" (p. 74). They are dreamy not because of the satisfaction of the need to obtain the antiques or what antiques represent. Instead, they are dreamy because they are at a stage closer to

jouissance, driven by the satisfaction of drives on both dopamine and transgression. Doing drugs at their age and daydreaming about getting their own identity are two things that are bizarre and discouraged by the Big Other, however, not only are they conducting those acts, but they are also "freeing" shops of antiques in the process. This transgression, both physical and psychological, satisfies a drive that is "the only form of transgression permitted to the subject in relation to the pleasure principle" (Pluth, 2007, p.75), offering a temporary reprieve from the Symbolic's demands.

Wendy's persistent pursuit of the drive of transgression is also shown in her outburst at the end of the novel. Freshly out of an antiques shop with a purchase, she gets lost in anger upon hearing the news reports of government injustices against refugees. Confronting the fence directly, she hurls an antique barometer at it, channeling her frustration and pressure into a physical act of rebellion that shorts the fence completely. Wendy vows to repeat this defiant act daily, promising to "get herself arrested...bombarding that fence with people's histories and with the artefacts of less cruel and more philanthropic times" (Smith, 2017, p. 255). In this particular moment, antiques re-enter the Symbolic realm, no longer as objects of nostalgia but as a signifier of personal memory and a better past. Wendy has long come to terms with "'not-having' the phallus" (Homer, 2005, p. 55) in her previous encounters regarding antiques and antique shows. Yet, this moment marks a turning point. Coming out of an antique shop, a dreamland of all the past sweet memories, to the cruel reality, the segregating fence, and people's blatant display of unfriendliness towards each other, her conscience snaps, not allowing her to betray her heart and herself any longer. However, while Wendy's rebellion ultimately reaffirms her defiance against the Big Other, it also unveils the limitations of the Symbolic order. The fence, as a symbol of societal prohibition, remains a boundary she cannot fully dismantle. Thus, driven by the lack of a complete identity and the impossibility of true fulfillment, her plan to repeatedly attack and break the fence satisfies her desire to be seen and treated as an independent subject. While this attempt of resistance and defiance cannot overturn the castration, her individual identity is affirmed when Zoe shouts her name out loud, granting her the recognition she has long sought within the Symbolic order. This moment reinforces her subjective agency, even as she continues to pursue *jouissance* through acts of defiance. For the first time in the novel, her name is not being uttered by her own mouth, but by another being. She is no longer just Elisabeth's mother or someone the townspeople do not even acknowledge. She becomes Wendy, a proud woman who stands up against the cruelty and unfairness that exist in the world. Through her relentless defiance, Wendy refinds her long-lost individual identity from the confirmation of another being. Though still bound by the

constraints of the Symbolic order, she is more whole than she has been before.

Wendy's journey across these three key moments reflects the evolution of her individual identity. Initially, Wendy's engagement with antiques and the symbolic structures of the antiques show illustrate her passive consumption of narratives imposed by the Big Other. This leaves her identity fragmented and defined by external commodification. However, her refusal to comply with the TV production team's demands marks a pivotal turning point—she disrupts the symbolic narrative, exposing its inauthenticity while asserting her integrity. Later, her imagined antique symphony with Zoe provides a fleeting but profound connection to a deeper, truer sense of self, allowing her to momentarily transcend the symbolic constraints and redefine the meaning of value and identity. Freed from their commodified and objectified roles, antiques become vessels for Wendy and Zoe's unspoken desires and fragmented identities. This moment showcases the possibility of envisioning an identity unshackled from societal expectations, though it remains firmly within the realm of imagination. Finally, Wendy's act of rebellion against the fence finalizes her transformation, as she channels her frustration and fragmented identity into a defiant confrontation with societal injustice. Through this act, Wendy reclaims her subjectivity in a tangible and public way. She gains recognition from Zoe, freeing herself from societal roles and national identity. Jouissance acts as a driving force behind Wendy's actions throughout this process. It creates tension between the possibility of fulfillment and the impossibility of achieving it. These near-jouissance experiences allow her to reclaim a sense of self and keep pursuing her individual identity. While her journey does not fully escape societal limitations, it marks a significant step toward reestablishing a more cohesive sense of identity.

CONCLUSION

In Ali Smith's *Autumn*, Wendy Demand, the mother of the protagonist, undergoes significant transformations in her sense of national, social, and individual identities, which are regrettably ignored by the previous researchers. Using Lacan's ideas, this paper reveals that Wendy's journey represents her attempts to navigate her sense of self amid marginalization asserted by societal constrictions. As a Scottish woman living in an English town, Wendy faces not only rejection in her local English community but also dismissal within the confines of her own daughter due to cultural and generational differences. Initially, she turns to antiques as a means of finding belonging in national and social realms. However, she eventually recognizes the limitations of these pursuits, confined by the Symbolic constraints of the Big Other. Despite this realization, Wendy never ceases trying to fulfill her lack. Turning her focus toward individual identity, she rebels against the symbolic constraints imposed by the Big Other, propelled by the pursuit of

jouissance. These moments, though fleeting and painful, prompt her to keep pushing the limit of the Symbolic. Wendy's actions, from reinterpreting antiques to defying societal norms, show her growth and the complexities of her identities. However, Smith's portrait of Wendy is not consistent, partially because of her role as a supporting character that limits the novel's focus on her internal evolution. She begins as a socially invisible figure stuck in national identity turmoil and later evolves into someone actively engaging in public acts of defiance.

However, the depiction of this transformation is not smooth. The narrative omits her internal transition process, instead focusing on the portrait of the distant mother-daughter relationship. As a result, some of her actions appear illogical. In particular, before the "fence incident," Wendy takes Zoe to an antique shop to "show off how much she knows about antiques" (Smith, 2017, p. 254) when she has already passed the stage of seeing antiques as the ideal-I and the Other. She no longer needs to seek validation from antiques by this stage; instead, she views them as allies against symbolic constrictions. This contradiction reflects the inconsistency in Wendy's identity evolution, where her actions sometimes regress to earlier stages of her journey, and this undermines the narrative cohesion of her transformation. Despite these gaps, Wendy remains a compelling character who reflects the conflicting mentality of the older generation as a whole. Elders, often left behind by rapid technological advancements and the alienating effect of media, are pushed to seek other kinds of affirmation outside of their families, particularly during the tumultuous time of the "Brexit" referendum. Antiques, heavily marketed by media as symbols of nostalgia and cultural identity, become a double-edged sword for this generation. While offering a sense of recognition and belonging, they simultaneously perpetuate the elder's marginalization by confining them in societal constriction, leaving them lost and angry at the outcome. Wendy exemplifies this paradox. Bruised and hurt by this toxic dynamic, Wendy's reaction is the reflection of both sides of the older generation: some of them, like her at the beginning of the novel, remain pacified by antiques as a source of temporary and insufficient pleasure; whereas others, like her at the end of the novel, recognize the limitations of nostalgic feeling and actively search for a way to break free from this cycle. As a double-sided mirror, Wendy provides us a glimpse of the struggling older-aged mass in society under the influence of the referendum and "Brexit."

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