

Book-Review

Ali Smith's *Autumn*: A Tale of Human Compassion

Pratiti Shirin

Autumn

Ali Smith

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A tale of human being's interconnection with nature and the seasonal cycles, *Autumn* is a passionate narrative of neighbourly love, compassion towards fellow human beings and the unlikely friendship between a child and an elderly man. The opening chapter shows the elderly man, Daniel Gluck, as being washed up on the shore of some kind of a beach. He is lying flat and also, finds himself flying at one point, with possession of improved vision, taste and touch. It is only in the later chapters that Mr. Gluck is revealed as being semi-comatose, lying in a hospital bed in London and therefore, the opening chapter, as the visionary hallucination of a dying man. As the novel unfolds, we get to know about Elisabeth who is 32 years old and who works as a junior university lecturer of art history and who lives with a slightly fanatic and panicked mother. In flashback and in several continuing chapters, the novel reveals how Elisabeth took her first interest in her neighbour Mr. Gluck as an eight-year-old when the latter was required to do a school assignment on her neighbour and how

this incidence marked the beginning of an unlikely friendship between Mr. Gluck who was already elderly then and Elisabeth.

As the plot unfolds, contemporary issues such as television are brought in and how technology controls our everyday dreams and desires. We are told about a reality show in which Elisabeth's mother participates and in this way, meets her childhood idol which is a dream-come-true for the former. She forms a new friendship—which borders on eccentricity—with another participant whom she gets to meet through this show. Fun is made of the typically British habit of particularity when Elisabeth's passport picture forms subtly short of the standards whereby the post office which is the authority for checking the passport application before sending it to the passport office, rejects Elisabeth's application for a passport renewal and she still decides to send it to the passport office without the post office's approval.

A theme which resonates throughout this poignant novel is how childhood friendships and associations might forge future directions for a child and how those associations shape what type of a person that child might become as an adult. Mr. Gluck's interest in pop art which he instilled in Elisabeth ultimately shaped the latter's career choice and consequently, she became an art history teacher. We are revealed how Elisabeth was told by her Master's thesis' supervisor that there were no British women pop art artists but how Elisabeth pursued this topic because Mr. Gluck showed her some paintings by Pauline Boty—the only British woman pop art artist—as a child. We get to know not only of Boty's unconventional lifestyle lived in the early sixties in London but also of her perhaps most famous painting titled 'Scandal 63' which had been missing since the year it was painted. There were only photographs of it (225). It was based on the political scandal involving Christine Keeler, a famous showgirl and model, her friend Stephen Ward and John Profumo who was a minister in the Conservative Party in 1963. Ward had introduced Keeler to Profumo and also another

man who was later revealed to be a Soviet spy. This affair happened during the Cold War years so that Ward ultimately committed suicide, Profumo had to step down from his position as Secretary of State for War and the Conservative Party fell in the general election held the next year.

Although introduced to Christine Keeler and her life through Mr. Gluck, the latter himself remains a mysterious character to Elisabeth—a neighbour—throughout the novel and it appears to Elisabeth from her association with him that he was a friend of Keeler. Elisabeth's assumptions are not baseless: she finds out that Daniel Gluck had a one-hit wonder in 1962 and its lyrics were still being used in a current advertisement for a supermarket. She calls up the supermarket's head office—pretending to be Daniel Gluck's agent—only to be met by an answering machine, for infringement of copyright violation of the song and gives the supermarket a 24-hour-ultimatum to call her back with profits earned from the song and legally owed to Mr. Gluck. Her courageous attempt is worth a try and we know the extent of her depth of her feelings for Mr. Gluck when Elisabeth's mother reveals that although she hasn't been home for years, Elisabeth not only came to visit her mother but also started living with her in order to take care of Mr. Gluck in the hospital because the hospital failed to identify any immediate relatives of him. It is here that the extraordinariness of the novel becomes clear to the reader: the younger generations are often accused of being indifferent; of not caring enough for one's surroundings or one's peoples or the world. But here we get a 32-year-old character who not only cares but is compassionate enough to remember her neighbour who was her guide in life and to move in with her mother in order to look after him in his deathbed. Her mother tells her friend that Elisabeth didn't visit her for once in 6 years' time but as soon as her mother was informed by a former neighbour on the net that Mr. Gluck had moved into a nursing home, Elisabeth had started visiting her mother every week—sometimes twice—all the summer that year until she moved in (214-15). A

brief chapter also reveals Elisabeth's political consciousness—and therefore, her social consciousness—on Brexit and its aftermath which according to Elisabeth, is a line that has been crossed (61).

This illuminating novel gives a glimpse of a life lived in contemporary Britain in the post-Brexit context and shows that, despite a significant place glamour, technology and materialism hold in modern life, immaterial things such as human relationships continue to have invaluable impacts on individual's lives.

About the Reviewer

Pratiti Shirin is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh. She completed a Masters in Education and International Development from the UCL Institute of Education, London, UK, in 2015 under the Commonwealth Shared Scholarship Scheme. Her publications include 'The Position of Women in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*' published by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh in 2009. In 2016, she published her London based memoir *Under European Skies*. Her areas of interests include post-colonial literature, feminism and gender studies. She is currently writing columns on human rights issues and others in the Dhaka-based *Daily Our Time*. She may be contacted at pratshirin85@gmail.com.