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Ali Smith's *Autumn*: A Collage of Real and Unreal, Temporal and Timeless

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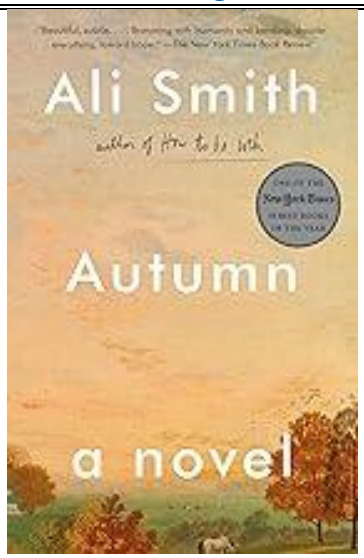

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Abstract

Ali Smith, in the first installment of her seasonal quartet *Autumn*, weaves together multiple themes and images to create a mélange that takes its readers into a dreamlike journey across time, space, and history. At the same time, Britain's only female painter of the Pop Art movement in the 80's Pauline Boty's collages and their interpretations form a significant portion of the novel that functions as a parallel subtext in its structure. Keeping the post-Referendum divided Britain in the background, Smith in *Autumn* recounts an unconventional love story between Elisabeth and Daniel, that is both timeless and temporal, beyond any strict definition, and deeply rooted in the soul. Together they create a multilayered reality embedded in their imagination, which contains

the meaning of life for them. Just as a collage has no apparent symmetry or order, but still manages to produce a sense of purpose and beauty, so also Smith's novel, devoid of any chronological order or linear narrative structure, shifting back and forth in time, is able to please its reader with a sense of autumnal fulfillment and hope. Besides focusing on these thematic and structural aspects, the paper will also engage with the political undertone of the novel that has earned it the title of the first 'Brexit novel', which has added another layer to its complex collage-like tapestry. The neo-formalist method as employed by Caroline Levine to expand the concept of form in literary fields will be used in the latter part of this paper to analyze how the multiplicity of ideas work together. Overall, this paper will examine how in *Autumn*, by working with several themes and issues, Ali Smith manages at the end to combine all into a collage, which is in itself organic and whole.

Keywords: Ali Smith, *Autumn***,** Collage, Narrative structure, Form, Neo-formalism, Erotohistoriography, Conviviality

Ali Smith's *Autumn* is crafted following a nonlinear structure that often vacillates between dream and reality, as well as from past to present. This first installment of Smith's seasonal quartet prepares the ground for her five-year-long literary project which continues through three consecutive novels after *Autumn* titled *Winter*, S*pring,* and *Summer*. Although there is no evident connection or continuation of a plot among these four novels, combinedly they raise a common question in their reader's mind which is, how much of the contemporary time and events can be and should be portrayed by the artist through their artworks. Ali Smith naturally gravitates towards portraying the importance of art in making sense of the world, and her ambitious seasonal quartet is also no exception.

Autumn's main action revolves around the lifelong friendship, which can also be interpreted as a platonic love affair between Elisabeth Demand, a single art history lecturer in her early thirties, and Daniel Gluck, a centenarian on his deathbed. Daniel has been a polite and sensitive person, who also happens to have lived quite an eventful past, which is gradually revealed to Elisabeth and the readers as the novel progresses. Through his speech, memories, dreams, and "time travels" (Smith 175), Daniel in both his conscious and subconscious states, puts together a

collage that is, or might have been his life. He is seventy years older than Elisabeth, who was eight when she first met him as her neighbor.

Despite this huge age gap, they form a bond during the course of their lives and create a love that is complex, metaphysical, and beautiful. They discuss the books they have read, create pictures in their minds, and try to make sense of the world around them. Both of them have empty spaces in their lives that are filled by the other's existence. Elisabeth, as an intelligent child, lacked the intellectual stimulation she needed. Moreover, she does not have any other siblings, a father figure, or a male model in her family. Her relationship with Daniel enables her to whet her appetite for knowledge, especially of art and literature, and groom her mind, which results in her becoming a sensitive and sensible young woman. Daniel, on the other hand, finds in Elisabeth a companion with whom he could spend his lonely days, discussing his ideas on various topics. She might have also served as a replacement for his brilliant young sister Hannah, whom he had lost to the Holocaust when she was in her early twenties.

This odd friendship puzzles Elisabeth's mother who suspects her of having a father fixation. She also believes Daniel to be an old gay man, who is taking advantage of her daughter's innocence to spoil her. These suspicions might have been triggered by her own queer tendencies, which later in the novel are confirmed as she comes out as a lesbian. Although Elisabeth's mother has erroneously interpreted her relationship with Daniel as something "Unnatural. Unhealthy" (Smith 83) at the beginning, she is correct in asserting that Daniel indeed affects her daughter psychologically, but in a good way as the readers can understand through Elisabeth's narration of her time spent with Daniel and the overall effect he has had on her. He encourages Elisabeth to think differently, find meaning that lies beneath the seemingly meaningless, and see life as a collage of events that, when put together, turns into something profound and meaningful. He might have even influenced her decision to study art history later in life by directing her inquisitive mind toward art interpretation and appreciation.

When they first met, Elisabeth pretended to be someone else, her nonexistent sister. After a while when Daniel had amused her with his talks about the meanings of their names and she had put her guard down, he greets her saying, "Very pleased to meet you both. Finally" (Smith 52). When Elisabeth asks what he meant by 'finally', he replies, "The lifelong friends . . . We

sometimes wait a lifetime for them" (Smith 52). Indeed, this is the beginning of a friendship that has lasted a lifetime, taking up the last part of Daniel's and the formative years of Elisabeth's life, and nourishing them both to feel complete for a while. Daniel's prophetic words do come true as we witness a friendship that defies all normal definitions of friendship or love.

While chronicling this relationship, Ali Smith masterfully incorporates other themes that involve aging, the fluidity and complexity of time, different forms of love, art history, politics and its deceits, gender inequalities in fine arts, victimization of women in scandals, different forms of truth, and, above all, how easily people can become divided and can turn hostile by their prejudices that ultimately curtail their common sense and humanity. This tendency, or rather the flaw of not being able to see the results of mindless actions and the inability to see the fallacy of it is embedded in human nature. Daniel explains this disturbing human tendency to Elisabeth, in a way suitable for a child to comprehend, while showing how their cat is easily fooled by the vanishing coin from his hand right in front of its eyes, "See how it's deep in our animal nature . . . Not to see what's happening right in front of our eyes" (Smith 175). This is how Daniel gradually works on Elisabeth to shape an intelligent child's perception of the world, develop her creativity, make her aware of reality as it is, and ultimately prepare her to face it.

Courtesy: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/oct/21/gliff-by-ali-smith-review-a-warning-from-the-near-future

Ali Smith has undeniably grounded her novel in reality with its critical focus set on the post-referendum schism among the people in Britain and its consequences. For further clarification of the political setting of the novel and to get a proper hold of the historical moment with which Smith primarily deals, it is important to discuss how they are related to her main plot. The period in which her novel begins is one week after the Referendum results. Ali Smith recreates the country's atmosphere after the election and her position about the result in a string of sentences. She writes,

> All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing . . . All across the country, people felt unsafe . . . All across the country, people felt legitimized. All across the country, people felt bereaved and shocked . . . All across the country, people felt history at their shoulder. All across the country, people felt history meant nothing. All across the country, people felt like they counted for nothing . . . All across the country, people told people to leave . . . All across the country, politicians lied . . . All across the country, promises vanished . . . All across the country, nobody spoke about anything else. All across the country, resist bile was general . . . All across the country, everything changed overnight . . . All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there, a line drawn here, a line crossed there. (Smith 59-60)

Through these simple but powerful lines, Smith conveys the overall condition of Britain in that historical period. Smith shares in her interview with Olivia Laing that her first plan was to plot *Autumn* in an antique shop where life is set off as a farce, but later she decided to change the setup of the novel and explains the reason behind the change saying:

> The notion of a referendum is in any case a divisory line: you choose one side. Meanwhile, you've got the mass division of 65 million people crossing the world from parts of it which are untenable, unliveable and in flames. And what's left of the world deciding whether or not to open the gates or the walls or to build more gates or walls. How can we live in the world and not put our hands across a divide? How can we live with ourselves? It isn't either/or. It's and/and/and. That's what life is. (Laing)

Autumn is the outcome of this obligation felt by a conscious writer, especially as "she's not . . . an artist who seeks to wall herself off from the world" (Laing). At the very beginning of *Autumn*, Ali Smith recreates the horror of the dead bodies of refugees, both children and adults, washing up on beaches that summer, people who were trying to flee the 'unliveable' parts of the world. She also incorporates images of people "holidaying up the shore from the dead" (Smith 12), signifying the insensitivities and carelessness on people's part, that allow such atrocities to repeat themselves time and again throughout human history.

Although the scenes are in Daniel's mind while he is drifting in and out of consciousness at a care home, the foundation of these dreams is his subconscious knowledge of current affairs derived from Elisabeth's visits, during which she would read newspapers to him. His memories and experiences would also surface from his subconscious within these dreams. Smith draws scenes from the Second World War as a digression that involve Daniel's sister Hannah, who had probably been killed during the war by the Nazi forces.

While dealing with the historical injustices, she also hints at the inherent deceit in the political arena as well as in the artist community, which later on is further illustrated through the incorporation of Pauline Boty's life and work in several sections in her novel and a fleeting segment about Christine Keeler and her childhood traumas of being exposed to brutalities by "The man she called Dad" (Smith 166). These inclusions serve to thematize the discrimination women face in the field of art and their victimization in the political arena and also problematize the seemingly insignificant events in a girl's psychological development.

Pauline Boty's life and works further function as a subplot that runs along the main narrative as she also serves as Daniel's love interest. Boty's artworks, especially her collages, parallel the structure of Smith's novel aesthetically. These two forms of creative work also operate similarly on a thematic level. Smith, like Boty, conjures up a collage-like world from the amalgamation of fragments of real history, fictional representations of historical events, and pure fiction. This mode of juxtaposition of practical and surreal in *Autumn* ultimately leads the readers to contemplate multiple issues that are closely connected to here and now. One such issue is the 'multiculturalism' in Britain and its 'conviviality' to allow coexistence, as dubbed by Paul Gilroy

in his book *Postcolonial Melancholia*. In the preface of this book, Gilroy explains his idea of 'conviviality' as follows:

> I use this to refer to the process of cohabitation an interaction that has made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere. I hope an interest in the workings of conviviality will take off from the point where 'multiculturism' broke down. It does not describe the absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance. Instead, it suggests a different setting for their empty, interpersonal rituals, which, I suggest, have started to mean different things in the absence of any strong belief in absolute or integral races. (Gilroy xv)

Almost twelve years after the publication of Gilroy's book, Petra Rau also echoes Gilroy's deduction in her essay titled, "*Autumn* after the Referendum". She posits, "The referendum, in *Autumn*, is a particularly egregious symptom of our peculiar 'now' and not 'noticing' how fundamentally divided the country had become before the vote, let alone afterward" (Rau 38). Gilroy believes that the existing form of multiculturalism as practiced in Britain was "unkempt, unruly, and unplanned" (Gilroy xiv). So, as an alternative, this idea of convivially coexisting in a multicultural setting, where, according to Gilroy, the concept of "multiculturalism" itself had failed, possesses the potential to work.

This concept of 'convivially coexisting' resonates wonderfully with Smith's use of the 'collage' device to imply a possible method of harmonious collaboration. Just as in a collage, all the seemingly inconsistent and incompatible parts coexist to create something better than the integrated parts and acquire a new meaning, so also Gilroy and Smith seem to advocate for similar methods to allow convivial living in a multicultural society.

Peter Elbow in his essay titled "Collage: Your Cheatin' Art" discusses the use of narrative collage in creative and literary writing. He explains how the apparently unrelated elements in a collage come together and create an artwork that succeeds in producing the desired effect or conveys the artist's message. In his observation, "Collage uses the simplest but most effective aesthetic principle: put things together if they sort of go. They need to 'go' . . . But not too well. Interest and pleasure increase if there is some friction, resistance, difference. A bouquet is a

collage, but a good bouquet needs some clash" (Elbow 26). He continues the discussion a few pages later as, "The collage lets us *skip* what's hard. Skip figuring out exactly what we are really trying to say. Skip unity. Settle for a gathering of parts that are all sort of related. Skip organization and just put pieces in some intuitive order. And skip transitions altogether" (Elbow 31). Just as Pauline Boty has applied this 'intuitive order' to create her collages, so also Ali Smith uses the technique in organizing the multiple themes that her novel deals with.

About this multiplicity of themes and their collage-like formation in *Autumn*, Petra Rau says,

> All are equally important and equally significant. Their narrative joining and ordering becomes the work of (often retrospective) interpretation which is itself a mutable history; a collage with several themes; white noise from which identifiable tunes emerge. To be allowed to search semantic possibilities requires a Nietzschean untimeliness, a slight disjunction. (Rau 38)

One has to be aware of the disjunctive nature of both time and history and be able to unite all the themes and events, which are without any 'transition' in *Autumn*, to make any meaning out of this collage of a novel. Daniel employs both these topics while in conversation with Elisabeth. Elisabeth remembers when Daniel had first visited her house and she had asked him whether he would have liked to time travel if it was possible. Daniel responds by saying, "Time travel is real, . . . We do it all the time. Moment to moment, minute to minute" (Smith 175). This is one of the significant lessons that Elisabeth gets from Daniel, and that is exactly what she does throughout the novel along with Daniel, which contributes to the multilayered structure of the narration.

Smith develops her plot through multiple and nonlinear interactions between Elisabeth and Daniel and also from the fragmented events of Daniel's life, as presented in his own words. This gives the novel a disjointed structure which at the same time mirrors the fragmented quality of time in the novel. When Daniel explains to Elisabeth how time travel is real, he is referring to how all human beings tend to travel back and forth through time in their memories as well as subconscious dreams, and at the same time make her see how a specific moment can become

simultaneously temporal and timeless. Smith highlights this fleeting nature of time to also explain how subjective the experience of time can be. By entwining the past with the present, as well as the real with the dream world, Smith expands the experience of time as being something beyond an immediate or actual phenomenon.

Daniel first uses the term 'collage' in his conversation with Elisabeth when she was eleven. He asks her, "You want to go to collage" (Smith 71). Elisabeth thinks that he has misspoken by replacing the word 'college' with 'collage', and so corrects him by saying, "I want to go to college" (71). But Daniel continues saying he has meant higher studies at college, but that as a form of collage. He provides her with a brand-new definition of college. He says, "Collage is an Institute of education where all the rules can be thrown into the air, and size and space and time and foreground and background all become relative, and because of these skills everything you think you know gets made into something new and strange" (Smith 71-72). And this is also what life and history stand for Daniel, what he wants Elisabeth to realize as well. He never tells her about his own life chronologically, not even systematically. She gets to know him by what he tells her about himself in bits and pieces over twenty-four years of their acquaintance. Daniel creates a collage of his life in front of Elisabeth from which she has to derive the meaning for herself to know who he really is at present and who he used to be in the past. To understand how such an unsystematic method can succeed in forming a genealogy of history, we can use the term 'Erotohistoriography', coined by Elizabeth Freeman. She defines it as,

> Erotohistoriography is distinct from the desire for a fully present past, a restoration of bygone times. Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as to encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as a hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to affect, figure, or perform that encounter. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporal sensations. (Freeman 95-96)

We see a parallel here between the method described by Freeman and the way Daniel presents himself and his life for Elisabeth to make sense of it. Only his corporeal presence in front of her at any moment would have never been enough to produce the history of his being. But when he is both conscious and unconscious as an old dying man in the care home, his mere bodily presence serves to establish a relation between past and present time. Elisabeth too here uses the time-traveling techniques that she has learned from Daniel to remind herself what he has been for her. This dying man in front of her is no less than a finished work of collage for her. For Elisabeth, Daniel stands for an eventful past and he is someone whom she has taken so long to understand fully and might still have failed. Daniel's life thus transcends his bodily presence, and he becomes a signifier of the temporal and timeless quality of human existence.

Ali Smith in her novel revisits the past to revive Pauline Boty and her work. How Boty's collages serve *Autumn* structurally has already been discussed. But the artist's own life and the subjects of her paintings also serve as an erotohistoriographical instrument to establish a genealogical history in reference to the scandalous 'Profumo Affair' of 1963 and the Referendum in June 2016. In response to Olivia Laing's question on the reason behind referring to Boty's works several times in the novel, Smith explains that *Autumn* connects the Referendum of 2016 with the trial of 1963 because, "Both are key years . . . in which a lie in the political sphere had dramatic consequences for society at large. Like Brexit, like the invasion of Iraq, the Profumo affair marked a turning point" (Laing).

The painting which in this reference should be discussed is the collage titled "Scandal 63". It is a collage in paint, at the center of which is a photograph of Christine Keeler by Lewis Morley. The background is bright red at the top of which is a blue strip that contains four leading male faces of the scandal. In the painting, Boty centers Keeler's proud figure as a protest against the victimization of women in scandals. According to Martin Gayford, "A further layer of complication was added by the fact that Boty posed in her studio, her body hidden by the finished painting, perhaps making an implicit comparison between herself and the star of the scandal, Christine Keeler" (Gayford xiv). Boty, in her other paintings and through her own lifestyle, attempts to reverse the gendered power dynamics which in the 60's Britain was seemingly

impossible. “She has found by experience that she is in a world where female emancipation is a password and not a fact - she's beautiful, therefore she should not be clever” (Smith 153).

Boty seems to be trying to reclaim agency over her body and herself as a thinking being when Smith makes her utter, “Happy to pose nude. I like nakedness. I mean who doesn't, to be honest? I'm a person. I'm an intelligent nakedness. An intellectual body. I'm bodily intelligence. Art’s full of nudes and I'm a thinking, choosing nude. I’m the artist as nude. I’m the nude as artist” (Smith 246). Through her own bodily existence and by painting pieces like “It’s a Man’s World I and II”, “The Only Blonde in the World”, “Sunflower Woman”, “Celia Birtwell”, and “Some of her Heroes”, Boty has denied the governing myth about women and their sexuality, and claimed the power and agency that Keeler, in reality, had been denied of. Boty, being a female artist, has been investigating female sexuality which in the 60s appeared to be radical and was considered as exercising a male’s prerogative.

Moreover, the titles of Boty’s paintings are intended to mock the attempt to typecast women, especially the attractive ones like herself (“Pauline Boty”). Pauline Boty adopts the art form of collage to synthesize these problematic female experiences and complex political issues, to create meaning for herself and her audience, and to reveal the true state of affairs. In like manner, Smith adopts this method of collage-making and uses it to create meaning out of the disjunctive time following Brexit and the lives of her two main characters, David and Elisabeth.

A neo-formalist reading of *Autumn* adds another layer to the novel’s deeper meaning and complex structure. Caroline Levine in the introduction of her book titled *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* discusses how wide a particular form can be to encompass a variety of topics and produce conceivable and comprehensible outcomes. A brief account of how Levine has worked through this issue is essential to understand her project. Levine starts by providing a very broad definition of form. According to her, formalist analysis of literature should not be limited only to the structural level of the literary piece, but should also include the socio-political elements of the work. From her standpoint,

> A contemporary critic, informed by several decades of historical approaches, would want instead to take stock of the social and political conditions that surrounded the work’s production, and she would work to connect the novel’s forms to its social world. She would

> seek to show how literary techniques reinforced or undermined specific institutions and political relationships, such as imperial power, global capital, or racism. (Levine 1)

Some might suggest that this second group of elements to study in the case of literature belongs to the field of new historicism. But Levine, by broadening the term 'form', includes both structural and socio-political contents of the work to study. Following her line of reasoning, it is the function of form to bring order, and bringing order entails the distribution and arrangement of matters, which in themselves are concerns of politics. This pattern allows her to conclude or justify that form is also a matter of politics. She presumes, that "politics involves activities or ordering, patterning, and shaping" (Levine 3), which are also matters that form deal in. She opines that readers and critics tend to treat aesthetics and political arrangements separately, whereas the fact is that we use the concept of 'structure' when we talk about social and scientific matters, as well as in literature when we talk about its relation to social orders. In essence, this concept of structure that combines politics and literature through form is a matter of aesthetics. This neo-formalist model of critiquing anything, be it a literary text or a socio-political event, that produces meaning and works well must be, according to Levine, following a pattern or having a form. In her words,

> We have typically treated aesthetic and political arrangements as separate, and we have not generally used the language of form for both, but we have routinely drawn on social scientific accounts of "structure"; we have certainly paid attention to national boundaries and hierarchies of race and gender. And it is a commonplace practice in literary studies to read literary forms in relation to social structures. So: the field already knows a great deal about forms. But it is a knowledge that is currently scattered across schools of thought and approaches. (Levine 3)

What Levine theorizes has been put into practice in the form of a novel by Smith in *Autumn*. This idea of form may appear conservative or fixed, but the quality of affordance and portability, as explained by Lavine in the later part of her introduction, allows forms to contain immense possibilities as well. Both Levine and Smith simplify the conventionally complex matters of literature and cultural studies by introducing this all-inclusive and broad definition of form, which can generate a more comprehensive understanding of both literary and sociopolitical matters.

At the end of the novel, Smith leaves her readers in a period of transition between autumn and winter. All the fragmented histories that she has unveiled about Daniel and Elisabeth, and their surrounding realities over the course of the novel combine to delineate their character as whole and comprehensible. The disorientation one feels almost throughout the novel from the lack of context, linearity, and reference is deliberately infused in the narrative to simulate a similar effect generated by a collage.

One has to know about the individual history behind each of the component parts of a collage to get the overall meaning of it. Similarly, Smith's readers have to delve deeper beyond the plot and know the story behind each seemingly unrelated segment of the plot to capture the real essence of *Autumn*. Like a collage, Smith imaginatively bends and blends these seemingly unrelated events and characters to complete a full circle, which in the end parallels her idea of a cyclic time and history, rather than it being a trail of consecutive phenomena. The sense of ending that the season autumn always brings with it, used to depress Elisabeth when she was fourteen. But Daniel made her see that summer was still there. The narration goes:

> He didn't say anything. But all across the landscape down behind them it was still sunlit blue and green. She looked up at him showing her how the summer was still there.
>
> Nobody spoke like Daniel.
>
> Nobody didn't speak like Daniel. (Smith 148)

Autumn, like Daniel and also like a collage, offers volumes to think about, without directly speaking to its readers or showing connections explicitly. One just has to be able to connect and decode the meaning for themselves as Elisabeth has done. Hope and hopelessness for a lost love, for an uncertain future during the Second World War, and for a country divided over a political decision mix and merge like a collage in Ali Smith's *Autumn*, a novel named after a season that stands for satiety, but at the same time signals decay and death.

The aftereffects of the Referendum have exposed manifold differences and divisions among people that previously remained hidden. But these types of ruptures are nothing new in human history. Ali Smith, in a lecture titled "The Novel in the Age of Trump", explains the

functions of a novelist at such a critical point in history and why a novel matters. According to her:

> The novel is a form that takes time, flips time, gives us time, renews old matter, reminds you what life is and how layered and dimensional it and language and thought and being are, allows understanding, allows fellow-feeling, analyses the notion of structure while being a structure of its own, demonstrates transformation, . . . and as a form always at the vanguard of its own form never stops finding the form to meet the needs of the time in which it is written . . . all from the pivot-point of the present moment, the no-time and the always, that each novel engages in and holds us through. (Smith "Ali Smith's Goldsmiths Prize lecture")

This concept and function of the novel find literary representation in *Autumn* which is set at a major historical point in Britain, when the conflict over Brexit has alienated some Britons from their own homeland. To present these political issues in her novel, Smith has broadened its form to the point where it becomes often vague and disorienting. But this is what one might expect to experience while capturing a historical moment that is simultaneously 'no-time' and 'always', as Smith explains in her lecture.

The beauty of *Autumn* lies in the fact that, to capture this politically charged atmosphere, Ali Smith has employed the form of a narrative collage, to meet the demand of that specific time in which it was written, and has aesthetically captured multiple issues in it, which are neither limited to a single socio-political event, nor can be bound in a single timeframe.

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