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Reading Ali Smith's *Summer* as a Political Fiction
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Abstract

In my paper, I analyse Ali Smith's *Summer*, the concluding piece of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, which addresses the timeliest contemporary issues, such as the demonization of minorities, shifts in the global political atmosphere, and climate change concerns. I reflect on the unique immediacy and contemporariness of *Summer*, as Smith wrote it concurrently with the unfolding events of the real world. My primary aim is to interpret Smith's portrayal of the current political climate, the impact of technology on knowledge and truth, the shifts in human relationships due to the pandemic, and the pervasive frustration and isolation of 21st-century humankind. Additionally, I investigate the recurring motifs of art and nature in Smith's *Quartet*. Further, I contemplate the question of genre, where I conjure up the main elements and features of four relevant genre categories: hysterical realism, climate fiction, political fiction, and feminist novel. I conclude that *Summer* is a political fiction, as it is a fiction that reacts to the social, economic, and political changes that happened in the last couple of years. I also explore the postmodern characteristics of the novel, including the destabilisation of temporal, gender, and literary boundaries, as well as linguistic disorder. Ultimately, I argue that Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* challenges readers to confront societal negligence and advocates for transformative change. By examining *Summer* through these objectives, I illuminate its thought-provoking and challenging nature, reinforcing Smith's call for action and political message.

Keywords: Ali Smith, *Summer*, political fiction, intertextuality, postmodern

Összefoglaló

Dolgozatomban Ali Smith *Summer* című művét elemzem, az írónő *Évszakok-kvartett* (*Seasonal Quartet*) könyvsorozatának utolsó darabját, amely a legaktuálisabb kortárs témákat tárgyalja, úgymint a kisebbségek bűnbakként történő beállítása, a világpolitika szólamainak változása és a klímaszorongás. Kitérek a *Summer* című regény egyedülálló közvetlenségére és egyidejűségére, mivel Smith a világban kibontakozó eseményekkel párhuzamosan írta könyvét. Elsődleges célom az aktuálpolitikai változásoknak, a technológiai fejlődés, tudásra és igazságra gyakorolt hatásainak, a világjárvány emberi kapcsolatokra gyakorolt hatásainak, valamint a 21. századi emberiséget átható frusztráció és elszigeteltség érzésének értelmezése Smith regényének olvasatában. Emellett vizsgálom a művészet és a természet visszatérő motívumait és ezek jelentőségét Smith *Évszakok-kvartettjében*. Továbbá műfajelméleti szempontból is vizsgálom a regényt, négy releváns irodalmi műfaj, a hisztérikus realizmus, a *climate fiction* (ökológiai válságra reflektáló szépirodalmi műfaj), a politikai fikció és a feminista regény főbb elemeinek és jellemzőinek tükrében. Műfaji elemzésem során megállapítom, hogy a regény

politikai fikció kategóriába sorolható, mivel a közelmúltban történt társadalmi, gazdasági és politikai változásokra reagál, egy fiktív történet keretében. Ezen felül, a regény posztmodern jellemzőit is tanulmányozom, beleértve az időbeli, nemi és irodalmi határok lebontását, valamint a nyelvi rendszertelenség mint kifejező eszköz szerepét. Végezetül levonom a következtetést, miszerint Smith *Summer* című műve arra buzdítja az olvasókat, hogy szálljanak szembe a társadalomban állandósult közönnyel, és felhívja őket a változtatás szükségességére. A regény ezen célkitűzéseken keresztül történő vizsgálatával, rávilágítok annak gondolatébresztő és cselekvésre biztató jellegére, politikai üzenetére.

Kulcsszavak: Ali Smith, *Summer*, politikai fikció, intertextualitás, posztmodern

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“In the middle of winter I at last discovered that there was in me an invincible summer.”

(Camus 1955, 121)

1. Introduction

This paper explores Ali Smith’s ability of innovation and her experimentalist nature, which is displayed through the destabilisation of temporal, gender, and structural boundaries in *Summer*, the last volume of the contemporary Scottish author’s *Seasonal Quartet*. I analyse Smith’s reasons behind the novel’s disrupted narrative and interpret it as a reflection of the contemporary social, political and economic climate. Moreover, I discuss and compare her detour from conventional storytelling and narration with Virginia Woolf’s similar disruptive narration in her novel *Mrs Dalloway*. I have chosen this comparison because firstly, Woolf had an impact on Smith’s writing. Ali Smith argues that similar to how the First World War caused Virginia Woolf to break with conventions, the crises people face today demand a similar attitude from the authors (Smith 2022). Secondly, James Wood also mentions the connection between Smith and Woolf in his article in *The New Yorker Magazine*: “There are, of course, literary progenitors—you can [...] detect the influence of Virginia Woolf (fluid interior monologue, an interest in artists, and in genderless creativity)” (Wood 2018). Thirdly, a quote from Woolf’s *Between the Acts* serves as one of the mottos of the novel at the beginning, among quotes from William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. This intertextuality is an important characteristic of Smith’s novels, as well as a typical feature of postmodern novels. I highlight the similarity in discourse to Woolf’s modernism, yet I argue that Smith’s novel is a prototype of the postmodernist novel, and I support my argumentation with the abundance of postmodernist features in *Summer*, such as the patterns of fragmentation, temporal disorder, and the multi-angularity of narration. I also examine the connective nature of art in the form of intertextual references throughout the *Seasonal Quartet*. I introduce intertextuality as another postmodern characteristic, which provides a frame that weaves each piece of the *Quartet* together.

From a thematic point of view, *Summer* displays the problems of contemporary society, such as the contemporary environmental concerns, the lack of social responsibility among people, and the complexities of womanhood, and it also raises awareness of the current shift to the right wing in global politics. As Smith mentioned in an interview, she has “[b]een thinking about writing a seasonal series of books for about 20 years now” (Anderson 2016), with the themes of such contemporaneity that it needed to be published in its own time, not years later, to portray the essence and the issues of the present. Therefore, each quarter of the series draws attention to the most urgent concerns of the contemporary era. *Autumn* is centred on the Brexit

vote; *Winter* refers to Donald Trump's presidential election in 2016. In *Spring*, Smith highlights the current hostile immigration regime and the subject of national borders. In *Summer*, she continues to bring attention to the agitating immigration policy of Britain¹, mentions George Floyd's 2020 tragic death, and delves into the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on individuals and the community.

In light of the novel's unconventional structure and contemporaneous topicality, I conclude, that *Summer* is an experimentalist political novel, a literary collage that amalgamates elements of hysterical realism, climate fiction, and feminist novels, but above all, it has strong contemporary political implications, and provides criticism against the aforementioned political transformations and their effect on society. I also argue that this very syncretism of literary genres, besides the previously discussed combination of two different literary traditions, modernism and postmodernism, further enhances the novel's postmodernity and innovatory nature. In the summary, I portray Smith's characteristic to intertwine opposites, yet creating a whole to line up polyphonic voices and allow readers to learn different versions of history and now.

The novel's plot is about the dysfunctional Greenlaw family, and the turmoil of the present time is told through their lenses. The middle-aged Grace is struggling with her divorce from the father of her children, who oddly enough, lives next door with his new girlfriend, Ashley. The spouses had different views on Brexit; Grace voted "Leave", while Jeff voted "Remain" (Smith 2020, 80), and presumably, their opposite political views resulted in their separation. Sacha, her teenage daughter, is a committed eco-activist and is infuriated by the injustice towards the people on the periphery, like the homeless, or the conditions of immigration detention camps. Her younger brother, Robert, is a troubled, bullied, but brainy teenager, who is addicted to video games and indifferent to violence, since he has grown accustomed to it in the virtual world. Robert is also obsessed with Albert Einstein and often considers himself a genius outlaw who despises the others around him. The interconnectedness of the novels is demonstrated through the reappearance of characters from previous seasonal novels. Charlotte and Art, characters from *Winter*, meet Sacha accidentally after his brother glued an hourglass into her hands. The two strangers take her home and start talking with her mother, which results in the Greenlaws joining them on a trip to Suffolk. It turns out that Suffolk is important to Grace, as she did a summer tour with a theatre group there in the 1980s, while Robert is eager to join, because Einstein once visited their destination in Suffolk. They are to

¹ Apart from the European migration crisis starting around 2015, the Windrush scandal in 2018 is also noteworthy in immigration discussions (BBC, 2018).

return a piece of a famous sculpture from *Winter*, which was left to Art by her late mother, to its owner, Daniel Gluck. The centenarian Daniel Gluck was one of the main protagonists in the first seasonal novel, *Autumn*. In *Summer*, he remembers his time in the Second World War, when he was interned in the Isle of Man, as a German citizen, and the reader also learns about his sister, Hannah's story in the French Resistance during the war.

The political novel genre has a long tradition; I use it in a limited perspective by highlighting the social responsibility and criticism role of Ali Smith's novel *Summer* by scrutinising its distinct narrative style firstly, secondly, the theme of intertextuality which is a dominant feature of Ali Smith's novels and finally reading and defining the genre of the novel. The conventional definition of the political novel is one that comments on political issues directly (Harvie 2005, 2). In my analysis, I primarily rely on Johannes Wally's broader interpretation of political fiction, which includes indirect approaches to political issues, a central characteristic feature of Smith's prose. To the best of my knowledge, there is no academic essay analysing Ali Smith's novel *Summer*, not to mention reading it as political fiction. This uncharted dimension to the existing interpretation of her oeuvre is the novelty of my research.

2. Destabilisation of Borders

2.1. Destabilisation of Structural Boundaries

In this section, I explore the destabilised structure and narration of the novel. When Smith started writing the *Seasonal Quartet*, she aimed to create an unconventional narration and structure, hence she said in an interview about her *Quartet* that “[t]he name we’ve given to the novel form also means new something new, something so new it’s news – I suppose I’m interested in asking structural questions of the form.” (Anderson 2016). Considering this, I examine and compare the narrative style of Smith in *Summer* to the modernist, Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. To support my argument, I analyse the destruction of structural boundaries in *Summer*, by the distortion of language and time, and the fragmentation of the narrative, which are all considered to be postmodern characteristics. With that in mind, I indicate the similarities and differences between Woolf’s modernist narration and Smith’s postmodern narrative style. However, I am aware of the fact that postmodernism dates from the mid-twentieth century, and many critics and scholars describe the style and concept in contemporary literature that emerged from postmodernism in the 1990s as post-postmodernism; this definition is not within the scope of my paper’s analysis.²

Summer, was written in a third-person point of view, where the omniscient narrator sees and hears everything and follows the characters’ thoughts and interior monologues. Additionally, it also mirrors the non-linear way of thinking of the human mind, with repetitions, lapses in time, free associations, and personal observations about the events, which are the characteristics of stream of consciousness narrative technique. J. A. Cuddon defined it as a realistic depiction of “[t]he multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind” (Cuddon 1984, 660–661). According to Robert Humphrey, three of the basic techniques of stream of consciousness are “[d]irect interior monologue, indirect interior monologue” and “[o]mniscient description” (Humphrey 1958, 28), which techniques I analyse through quotes from *Mrs Dalloway* and *Summer*. However, these techniques were present before twentieth-century fiction, what makes their employment unique in stream of consciousness narration is the “[n]ovelists’ awareness of the significance of the drama which takes place within the confines of the individual’s consciousness” (Humphrey 1958, 109) and that how these authors could turn the privacy of human mind into public in their novels.

² I consulted the book “Mi jön a posztmodernre?” by Sári B. László for information on post-postmodernism, but this notion it is not the focus of my research.

Virginia Woolf was a pioneer in breaking away from the traditional linear storyline and using the modern, stream of consciousness technique. In *Mrs Dalloway*, she succeeded to capture the natural flow of thinking, through Clarissa Dalloway's inner monologue, and she also used another characteristic of stream of consciousness, the blending of past and present:

For having lived in Westminster- how many years now? Over twenty one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or working at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hash, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed (Woolf 2013, 2).

The first passages of *Mrs Dalloway* demonstrate how Woolf used the indirect interior monologue technique, where the "[o]mniscient author presents unspoken material as if it were directly from the consciousness of a character and, with commentary and description, guides the reader through it" (Humphrey 1958, 32). Woolf moved backward and forward in time because, "[t]he quality of consciousness itself demands a movement that is not rigid clock progression. Instead, it demands the freedom of shifting back and forth, of intermingling past, present, and imagined future" (Humphrey 1958, 50).

Smith follows Woolf's footsteps in narrative style by giving access to almost all the thoughts and experiences of the characters. Smith herself compared her own style to Woolf's in an article in *The Guardian*, when she mentions *Mrs. Dalloway* as "[t]riumph, in what will turn out to be a long line of form-shifting, perception-shifting triumphs" (Smith 2022). She also concludes that the war and the social changes after the war forced Woolf to break with the conventions, and she emphasises that contemporary authors in "this time of massive shift and change, via Brexit, the spread of Trumpian demagoguery, Covid, and now Putin's invasion of Ukraine, will ask of us when it comes to literary transfiguration" (Smith 2022). With this narration, Smith creates a continuity between past and present time, and between the exterior and interior world. The irregular rhythm of the human mind is reconstructed in the following indirect interior monologue of Robert Greenlaw, and the teenage son of Grace Greenlaw:

Why have you never given me a compass (Robert Greenlaw to his father, in his head)?
Robert I've enough on my plate don't give me any more hassle (his father, to Robert Greenlaw, most days, in reality)...
Back to book. Robert Greenlaw opens it at random again (Smith 2020, 51).

While he is reading a book about Einstein's journey in Britain, he is also having a semi-imaginary conversation with his father. With that, Smith demonstrates the parallelism and rhapsody of human thinking. In addition to the abundance of thoughts running through the characters' minds, the peculiar punctuation also follows their psychological state and worldview. In the previous quote from *Mrs Dalloway*, the change of emotions and feelings was marked by semi-colons. In *Summer*, Smith occasionally fragments the sentences of Robert by exclamation marks, imitating a brief pause between the trains of thoughts whirling in the human mind:

ONE OF THE BLACKBOARDS GOT CLEANED BY MISTAKE.

!

Einstein's actual handwritten figures – erased.

! (51)

Here Robert reads a book about Albert Einstein and learns that Einstein gave a lecture once in England and wrote arithmetic equations on two blackboards, which were preserved and sent to a museum, but one of the blackboards was cleaned by mistake. I believe that the exclamation marks here serve as indicators of the emotional changes inside Robert since he is an avid of Einstein, and felt shocked after this revelation.

Another similarity to Woolf's style is that the storyline of *Summer* is non-linear. The events in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is told in non-chronological order, and in like manner, Smith jumps back and forth in time from past to present, and from present to future, even within a character's timeline. Hannah's story is an interesting example, as it is narrated in the present; however, it happened in the 1940's. Moreover, Hannah refers to earlier events from her childhood, by which she creates a past within the past. Daniel's story also combines present events and flashbacks from the days he spent in the internment camp in the Isle of Man, as an alien citizen during the Second World War. Neither of the novels have a conventional plot, rather a tangled, multidirectional story that faithfully echoes the social, political and economic climate of their respective age.

However, these novels of Woolf and Smith are not only similar in discourse, as *Summer* bears a slight resemblance in thematic as well to *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf wrote *Mrs Dalloway* in the aftermath of the Great War, when the world was in change, both on global and personal scale: empires collapsed, politics transformed, and the shocks of the war with the deadly influenza pandemic had a severe impact on the society. Approximately one hundred years later,

Smith's *Summer* also focuses on the contemporary chaos: Britain's leaving the EU, the Trumpian demagoguery, the rise of populism, the COVID-19 pandemic, the fear of irreversible environmental catastrophe, and the migration crisis. These events caused a vast feeling of insecurity, and brought along the unpredictability and destabilisation of life that resonates with the character of the post-war society. War as a motif also appears in *Summer*, as Smith recognises that the rhetoric of the pandemic, used by politicians, resembles the rhetoric of wars. Sacha cleverly compares the virus to the landmines of the Second World War and heavily wounded surfaces of a planet:

They all look a bit like little planets with trumpets coming out of their surface, or little worlds covered in spikes of growth, a little world that's been shot all over its surface by those fairground darts with tuft tails from the old-fashioned riffle ranges, or like mines in the sea in films about WW2 (40).

Another COVID motif, isolation and the lack of real, physical connection is captured in Sacha's second letter to Hero, a detainee at an immigration removal centre, when she mentions, "[t]hese teenage years are supposed to be amazing. I'm 16 and the highlight of my last three months has been watching crap movies on Netflix party with my friends" (Smith 2020, 246). To prevent disconnection during lockdown, Art asks Charlotte to phone daily and tell each other about what they thought or saw that day. He thinks it is a good way to ease the angst of isolation and to create the illusion of community with those who read their website and "[j]oin in with their own comments or thoughts if they want" (Smith 2020, 326).

In terms of the destabilisation of structure, Smith does not follow the traditional methods and classical structure of storytelling, and this oddity of structure in *Summer* is a characteristic of postmodern fiction. As Barry Lewis mentions in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, temporal distortion, which I examine in the next sub-chapter, fragmentation, and language disorder are typical features of postmodernism. According to Lewis "[t]he postmodernist writer distrusts the wholeness and completion associated with traditional stories, and prefers to deal with other ways of structuring narrative" so authors break "[u]p the text into short fragments or sections, separated by space, titles, numbers or symbols" (Lewis 2011, 174). This twisted and structurally shattered text is also present in Smith's novel. She neither breaks her novel into chapters nor does she number the sections. However, her frame story about the film-maker Lorenza Mazetti (1927-2020), divides the book into three numbered parts.

Nonetheless, I believe these numbers belong to Mazetti's 'chapters', rather than to the character's storyline, as Smith numbers only the beginning of the stories about Mazetti.

Regarding language distortion, Smith uses eccentric typography by not using quotation marks, ignoring traditional punctuation, and underlining words that have a significant meaning in the story. As a result, there is no identifiable division between the internal monologues and the public speech of the characters. In addition, *Summer* is written in colloquial English, with contractions, abbreviations, and symbols, which mirrors the everyday language usage of the postmillennial generation. When Sacha writes a text message to her friend, Mel, she signs it as "[s]achxxx" (Smith 2020, 33). Later in her response, she does not even write a word, but merely communicates through pictograms, like: "Heart emoji. Kiss emoji. Boxing glove emoji. POW emoji. Knight in shining armour emoji. Muscly arm emoji. Heart emoji. Heart emoji" (41). Similarly, Charlotte in her text message to Art violates the rules of grammar when she writes the first-person singular pronoun with a lowercase letter and misspells or abbreviates the word 'would' so that they become "i wd" (358). Another example is when she does not use uppercase letters in the first and surnames of "ashley" or "greenlaws" (355–357). By this method, Smith makes the text more life-like and conversational.

In contrast, she simultaneously uses language that only a "MEMBER OF THE EDUCATED ELITE" (70) can fully comprehend. For instance, she uses advanced, formal words like "antediluvian" (24) and writes conversations about metaphysics. This blending of high and pop culture, informality, and formality intensifies the novel's postmodern nature (Lewis 2011, 174).

Another important feature of postmodernism in *Summer* is multiperspectivity and the polyphony of voices. These characteristics are also present in Smith's contemporary, Zadie Smith's experimental, postmodern novel, *NW* to reflect the diversity of contemporary society, challenge the idea of single truth, and question the prejudices. Smith's usage of multiple characters as narrative voices in each novel of the *Quartet*, gives the reader a chance to learn about their own story and to understand the point of view of each character. With this technique, Smith creates an unbiased and multidirectional interpretation of the events. In her prologue, Smith directly addresses the reader with her questions about the negligence of society. Later, she creates a light-hearted and witty atmosphere, she engages with the reader in a familiar tone and starts Hannah's story as is she told a fairy-tale:

Here's a tale to drive away the time trimly. Once upon etc there was a king or lord or a duke that had a fair daughter, the fairest that ever was, with hair and skin as white and as red and as gold and as black as etc and once upon etc his daughter was stolen away etc (199).

In this section, I examined the novel's narrative style and compared Smith's narrative techniques, to Virginia Woolf's narration in *Mrs Dalloway*. I concluded, that despite the similarities with Woolf, *Summer* is not a modernist, rather a postmodern novel as Smith can only grasp the complexity and uncertainty of the contemporary era by using postmodern tools. To support my claim, I highlighted the novel's postmodern features, such as the distortion of the novel's structurality, the fragmentation of the text, the blend of academic, and conversational language and the multiperspectivity of narration in *Summer*. With my examples, I also showed that Smith does not let conventions organise her novel, and in the following section, I continue analysing her ungovernable attitude in terms of temporality, gender borders, and literary form.

2.2. Destabilisation of Temporal, Gender, and Literary Boundaries

In this section, I explore the further destabilising techniques used by Smith in *Summer*. I explore the temporal, identity- gender and literary determinations that Smith breaks in her novel. In an interview in 2016, Smith said that “[t]he way we live, in time, is made to appear linear by the chronologies that get applied to our lives[...]and novel in a form is always about time” (Anderson 2016). With that, Smith forecasted that her main objective throughout the *Seasonal Quartet* is to challenge the readers' traditional understanding of time.

Firstly, temporal boundaries, while Smith's *Quartet* roughly follows real-time, and the immediacy of the events plays a crucial part in her series, she also playfully moves forward and backward in time. She cuts the linear flow of time into pieces of memories, mixes them with contemporary events, and stirs the readers' time-perception by using grammatical and literary devices. Time has always been a significant and recurring theme in Smith's novels, as she said, “[n]ovels can't not be about time” (Smith 2017, 42). Time, as we know, is passing from the now to the then, measured in minutes and hours, recorded by calendars, but in terms of narrative time, anything is possible. According to Mark Currie, people are made to believe that there are only three tenses, which are connected to the “[t]hree logical time zones of past, present and future”, however, he notes that using the present tense does not necessarily refer to the present (Currie 2007, 138). That is displayed when in *Summer*, Smith tells Hannah's story in present tense, no matter that it actually took place during the Second World War. By juxtaposing

different periods and flitting between them, she shows the interconnectedness of past, present, and future.

Smith also blurs the boundaries between seasons. Just like the Big Ben in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the bonding motif here is summer; since both motifs indicate the passing of time and the changes of seasons, as well as being a site of memory that draws and weaves the paths of the characters together as an intergenerational pattern. However, summer in *Summer* does not have the traditional, archetypal meaning explained in Northrop Frye's *The Archetypes of Literature*. Here summer is not the "[a]rchetypal of comedy, pastoral and idyll" (Frye 1951, 104), instead it is reinterpreted by the polyphonic voices of the characters since summer bears a very different meaning to everyone. With the words of Grace, "[s]ummer isn't just a merry tale" because "[s]ummer's surely really all about an imagined end" (Smith 2020, 289). When Sacha's chest is filled with warmth after being praised and hugged by her mother, she is told that it is her "inner summer" (14). Daniel also refers to something similar when he writes to his "[a]utumn sister" to keep her "[I]nnerlichtenkeit lit" (192). The warmest of seasons regarded as the "[b]riefest and slipperiest of seasons" by Grace (290), but from the view of Robert "[i]t's too hot to do anything", and "[t]he whole season is like the smell round a rubbish truck" (100). Summer has a special meaning to the Gluck siblings, as Daniel was called "[s]ummer brother" by Hannah (241). At the same time, little Hannah was suffering from migraine headaches during the summertime when she heard the "[s]ummer noise of family", "[t]he summer noise of the city through the window shutters, traffic. Happy-sounding people in the daytime. Thug-songs through the night" (206). So, as Claude cleverly remarked to Hannah, "[y]ou can't put a pin through summer" (223). Yet the most pertinent interpretation of summer was given by its etymological analysis; Smith explained that the "[E]nglish word for summer comes from the Old English *sumor*, from the proto-indo-european root *sam*, meaning both *one* and *together*" (263). This definition of summer indicates that the motif of summer serves as a bridge between the characters, and as a point of stability in the permeable timeline.

Discussing the question of gender boundaries, Smith challenges the connectedness of gender and identity in *Summer*. I posit that Smith's gender-bending technique resembles the one Virginia Woolf uses in *Orlando*. Woolf's protagonist, a time-travelling poet, who turns into a woman overnight and experiences newfound freedom in this new role. In *Orlando*, which was first published in 1928, Woolf predated the modern conception of sexuality with her gender-fluid protagonist and voiced a critique on the labels and limitations attached to traditional gender roles (Kaivola 1999, 235–241). To sum up, Woolf crossed both temporal and gender boundaries in her book.

In many of Smith's books, the biological sex of the characters is fixed, however, the borders of gender are permeable. Her two most important works that focus on the topic of gender are *How to Be Both* (2014) and *Girl Meets Boy* (2007). Although *Summer*'s main concept is not the porous limits of genders, Smith still writes about the subject. Firstly, Smith reveals that Grace had relationships with both men and women in the theatre group, before her marriage. Secondly, Smith deconstructs the gender borders through the reincarnation of Daniel's late sister, Hannah in the body of Robert: "It's Hannah, God help him, there in the room, in the shape of a boy" notices Daniel (195). Then the two share an illuminating conversation about existentialism and Einstein that reassures Daniel that Robert is truly Hannah, since Hannah was always very witty and intelligent, just like Robert. Similar to Orlando, Robert crosses through gender, time, and space. Robert-Hannah highlights the same to Daniel, when s/he asks, "[i]f we follow Einstein's thinking and add together you plus me plus time plus space. What does that all make?", then answers that "[i]t makes you and I more than just your or I", "[i]t makes us us" (197). However, the similarity of Robert and Hannah is also implied by Smith's using exclamation mark in Hannah's letter to Daniel, with the same reason that she uses it in Robert's story in the beginning of the book. Concerning the question of gender, the author also pays tribute to Edwin Morgan, who was an advocate of gay love and wrote openly about same-gender relationships from the 1960s, by placing one of his poems in the epigraphs of *Summer*.

In terms of literary boundaries, Smith has an unorthodox approach to the traditional formal, literary rules and boundaries. She rebels against the formal structures, as Woolf did in the previously mentioned *Mrs Dalloway*, since Woolf did not differentiate between the internal monologues of their characters and the reality of the exterior world, and the private thoughts of Clarissa and the comments of the narrator are often blurred. Smith borrows these techniques in *Summer*, as the characters' inner conversations also intrude into the real events and the conversations around them. She also crosses the formal boundaries by lapsing in time, creating the past existence in the present by replaying memories during the narration, and by fragmenting her story with pieces of Lorenza Mazetti's art and life. The preface of *Summer* is also formally and psychically destabilising and unsettling. The repeated, short question of "so?" gives a rhythm to the foreword, which rhythm reminds us of the rhythmical cyclicity of seasons. The negligence of mankind and the author's anger is reflected in the simple question "Everybody said: so? As in so what? As in shoulder shrug, or what do you expect me to do about it? or I so don't really give a fuck, or actually I approve of it, it's fine by me" (3). She feels that she could demonstrate with articles and graphs "[w]hat history's made it clear happens

when we're indifferent", but she knows that "[w]hoever wants to disavow will dismiss in an instant with their own punchy little so?" (5). So: she writes an answer-novel in nowness about the contemporary fashion of acting like we do not care about the frightening events, the injustice and atrocities that are happening around us. By placing this question at the beginning of the novel, it serves as a call for action, a plea for change and unity. She urges the reader to reject apathy and disinterest towards the things happening today, before starting to read the novel.

The structure of the book is also formally unbound. There are no formal chapters in the book that would divide the segments from each other; rather Smith often leaves a blank page or a bigger space between the chapter-like parts of the book. The new parts are usually indicated by a change in the narrator because each character narrates their own part from their own point of view of the events. However, it is not exclusively true to all the parts, since *Summer* features letters between Sacha and Hero with dates on it and Smith numbered snippets from the life of Mazetti. Another peculiar formal feature is that the text begins roughly in the centre of the pages and even the page numbers are strangely situated, neither in the corner, nor in the middle, but somewhere in-between, on the bottom of the pages.

In this section, I have discussed how Smith distorts time, blurs gender boundaries and unbinds literary formalities. In my view, the destabilisation of boundaries can be interpreted as a postmodern epistemological, critical, and philosophical position since it reflects on the subjective nature of knowledge, give space for the deconstruction of binary oppositions and marginalised voices, and recognises the complexities and paradoxes of contemporary society. Additionally, it represents both Smith's unlimited power over her work and the freedom of art, while it also draws a sharp contrast between the playfulness of the novel's formality and the seriousness of its topicality.

3. Repetitive Motifs and Intertextuality in the *Seasonal Quartet*

3.1. The Power of Art and the Motif of Nature in *Summer*

In the previous chapters, I have discussed the narrative and structural characteristics of *Summer*, and analysed the reasons behind Smith's postmodern narration. I continue with a thematic analysis, where I first examine the repetitive patterns, such as art, nature, and intertextual references, and how these patterns create a bond between the novels of the *Quartet*. Smith lays a great emphasis on art and its power to connect people in her four seasonal novels. The same connective power is shown through intertextuality since each volume of the *Quartet* shares the inter-texts of William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens.

Moreover, *Summer*, as a concluding piece also contains references to previous seasonal novels. In the previous chapter, I have introduced Smith's aim to create a new understanding of time through her *Seasonal Quartet*, hence she refers to time as something "[c]yclic in continuance and at core, rather than consecutive" (Anderson, 2016). At the same time, this very cyclicity can also be linked to seasons and in general, nature. The cyclical motif of nature is another repetitive and conjunctive pattern in the *Quartet*, besides intertextuality and general art. In the first section of this chapter, I examine the recurring motifs of art and nature and their connective role in the *Quartet*. In the second section of the chapter, I contemplate how intertextuality links the four seasonal novels to each other.

Art and artists are pivotal in Smith's *Quartet* since they create a frame to the four novels. Each book of the saga pays tribute to a chosen female artist; *Autumn* has Pauline Boty's work, *Winter* has Barbara Hepworth's, in *Spring* readers are introduced to Katherine Mansfield, and finally in *Summer*, Smith chooses the Italian, post-war immigrant filmmaker, Lorenza Mazzetti (Smith 2020, 110). Smith creates an in-text graphic exhibition of Lorenza Mazzetti. First, Smith refers to Mazzetti's film, *K* (1954) in her prologue (5–6). Then Charlotte mentions a silent film with two men speaking without words, as something that might interest Ashley, the Greenlaw father's new girlfriend, who has turned dumb for unknown reasons. This film is called *Together* (1956) and was directed by Mazzetti (125–127). Smith closes her frame story, by reporting about Mazzetti's life and introducing the reader to her works in more depth (255–264).

Art also plays an important part in Daniel Gluck's time in the Isle of Man, where, as a German citizen, he was held as a prisoner in an internment camp established for detaining the enemy in the 1940s. Daniel Gluck finds out that the camp is full of "artists and clever folks" (Smith 2020, 185), there are musicians, painters, and writers. Daniel meets an artist, Kurt, who creates statues from rotten food and random items (178). Mr Uhlman, another prisoner, created

a picture book from his drawings that he did in the internment camp. Daniel also tells Elisabeth about the detainees' visit to the cinema, where they watched a Chaplin film, and that the guards also took the prisoners to a Schubert concert. From the previous examples, it can be seen that art plays a crucial role in the prisoners' life and they use their creativity to make the time of confinement more bearable. However, as Daniel remarks it to Elisabeth, "A prison is a prison [...] whatever you fill the time with" (180). Smith even creates a character named Art, a nickname for Arthur, which refers to his profession and personal attribute, as Art and Charlotte are both writers, and run a website together. According to Art, the importance of writing is enhanced during the lockdown, through which people can be "united in isolation" (338). His idea connects the confinement of the detention camps in the Second World War, and the confinement of lockdown, as in both cases art was a great relief to people.

However, Art and Charlotte are not the only creative professionals in the novel. Ashley, the Greenlaw father's girlfriend also writes a book. This updated dictionary goes beyond the traditional meaning of words and provides a new understanding of them by connecting each definition to a contemporary and controversial social or political phenomenon. Grace used to have a creative career as an actor, and she played Hermione in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* on a summer theatre tour. However, her love for literature stayed with her throughout motherhood, as she still enjoys quoting and reading classics and philosophy. Just like other novels of Smith, *Summer* also challenges the mere aesthetic function of art and presents the connective power of it. After all, the family of Art, his father, Daniel, his late mother, Sophia, and Art, is reunited, unawares, because of a stone sculpture.

Art also plays a transformative role in the contemporary socio-political climate since Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, is a form of social commentary and critique. The website run by Art and Charlotte also has an illuminating and informative effect on people, because it is an online reportage of ongoing events. Similarly, that is why Iris suggests Charlotte to use art as a political tool and write about truth of how the government handles the pandemic, show the valid data that is hidden by them, and the difficulties that NHS workers must endure.

Smith in most of her works and naturally in the *Seasonal Quartet* uses nature imagery. Her favourite nature motifs are trees, which are prevalent throughout the *Quartet*. In *Summer*, the tree motif appears when Grace, reminisces about a conversation she had with a John Mison, a joiner and specialist carpenter, in a church graveyard. He shows her an "[e]aten-away stone" with a poem on it, which goes like: "The tree in me shall never die. Be I ashes be I dust. That is the tree that joins the sky. To earth and us. The tree in me shall never die. No lovers sleeping breath compare. With her shy music in the sky. Of leaves and air" (Smith 2020, 305–306).

Smith also dedicates almost a whole page to list the typical English cottage garden plants, which resonates with the stereotypical, idyllic imagery of the summer in the British countryside. It also demonstrates the contrast between natural and built environment, as if nature belonged to the nostalgic past and the newly built, razor wire fence of the camp belonged to the harsh, plain reality of now. When Grace revisits the place of the church, which was disestablished and being replaced by an immigration detention camp, she manages to find the same stone with the poem on it that she can read with her fingers. She took a photo of it to show the “[p]retty verse” to her children, but on her way back she realises that “[a]ll she’d actually got a record of was a blur of twigs, a surface of old stone, some bright lichen” (317).

Another example of the motif of nature, the migrating bird, can be found in Sacha’s letter to Hero, an immigrant virologist in a detention centre. She wants to send him “[a]n open horizon” and she uses the symbol of a swift to say farewell to him: “If you see a swift in the sky, it’s carrying a message from a stranger who wishes you well and is thinking of you” (121). She also introduces him to the characteristics and appearance of the migrating bird, which Hero thanks her in his response at the end of the book. Hero writes back to Sacha that “I write to you today because I have seen this bird and its family in my sky. I want very much to tell you” (377). The bird motif reaches its culmination in this letter from Hero, who thanks Sacha “[f]or the bird messages” and uses the symbol of birds to bring love and warmth to her penfriend and all her loved ones:

I agree there is more summer to come and there will be more weeks of your bird in my sky. This makes me very happy. The bird that I see in the sky, the bird of your kindness in your letters to me, will fly to you in your sky in the shape of members of its family. They will bring with them my very best and warmest good wishes (379).

Hero’s strong connection to nature is further displayed, when Iris and Charlotte took him in during the lockdown, after he was dropped out of the immigration removal centre in the middle of the crisis. Having the opportunity of being outside in nature means a lot to him as he helps to “[k]eep neat and flourishing the flowers in the summer garden” (378).

The symbols of sky and wind are also featured in the letters of Hannah and Daniel to each other, as they agree to burn the letters they write and hope that the wind will bring the ashes to their siblings. Nature also belongs to the simple pleasures in life during the lockdown and a ray of hope, to which people in detention can cling. Art comes up with the idea of calling each other with Charlotte daily and telling what they have seen or experienced that day. He first tells her

about a pigeon who tried to hold a large twig in its mouth and managed to fly away with it. At first, Charlotte is sceptical about the whole idea and does not understand the significance of this moment, but Art explains that the pigeon is likely to build a nest from the twig, which in the surreal and chaotic reality of the pandemic, has a “[h]opeful, and natural” (327) meaning.

3.2. Traces of Intertextuality as Signs of Self-Referentiality

Since Julia Kristeva coined the term intertextuality in the 1960s, in her essay, *Word, Dialogue and Novel*, it became a dominant idea in literary theories that texts do not stand on their own, but have a connection to prior texts and these intertexts create explicit or implicit allusions in the reader. The way *Summer* echoes to other texts further proves its postmodernity as with the words of Graham Allen, “[a]ny discussion of the place of intertextuality within the arts leads us towards the issue of Postmodernism” (Allen 2000, 181). In this section, I provide examples of explicit and implicit instances of intertextuality in *Summer*, in addition to self-references to the other pieces of the *Quartet*. I argue that Smith uses intertextuality as a tool to create a bond between the other three novels of the *Quartet*. I also state that the self-references to previous characters and events of the *Quartet* through intertexts indicate that *Summer* is not only an ending but a concluding piece out of the four seasonal novels. I also explain how the works of William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens connects in thematic to *Summer*.

The seasonal revisitations of Shakespeare’s late romances start in *Autumn* with *The Tempest*, then in *Winter* Smith revisits *Cymbeline*, in *Spring* she uses *Pericles*, and in *Summer*, through Grace’s acting experience, she reimagines *The Winter’s Tale* in a feminist version. The choice is not coincidental, moreover, predictable as one of the epigraphs on the first page of the book: “O, she’s warm” (Smith 2020) is from this very play. The paradox created by choosing *The Winter’s Tale* for a novel entitled *Summer* showcases Smith’s wit and comical skills. However, as Grace concludes, “[t]he Winter’s Tale is all about summer, really. It’s like it says, don’t worry another world is possible. When you’re stuck in the world at its worst, that’s important. To be able to say that” (300). Grace’s message is meant for the people of the COVID-blighted, post-Brexit era; it says that even in the darkest of hours hope should not leave your side. The linking pattern of intertextuality between the seasons also appears in the form of Charles Dickens’s works. *Autumn* features *A Tale of Two Cities*, in *Winter* we can find Dickens’s famous festive tale, *A Christmas Carol*, *Spring* refers to *Hard Times* and finally *Summer* rephrases a line of *David Copperfield* as the main question of the novel. The opening line of *David Copperfield* is: “Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show” (Dickens 1966, 1). *Summer*

also starts with a feminist rephrase of this opening line “Whether I shall turn out to be the heroine of my own life” (7). It is a feminist declaration, since Smith challenges herself as a woman, to see if she can make a change with her *Seasonal Quartet*, and raise the interest of the readers to the contemporary crises. Smith also challenges the readers and asks them whether they have the power to make a change and take action themselves. However, David Copperfield is not the only Dickens reference in the book. Smith has chosen to borrow the ending line of *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* to quote in her novel. The ending line of *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain*; “Lord keep my memory green” (Dickens 1851) was used as one of the epigraphs in the beginning of the novel. The examples I have discussed in this paragraph are all explicit intertexts since Smith indicates their original author and uses quotation marks around them. Although, the rewritten Dickens quote by changing “hero” to “heroine” can be interpreted as an implicit reference at first, later the original quote and its source is revealed. Smith also uses an intertext from Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* when Daniel quotes from it in his letter to Hannah: ““On a thyme-scented, bird-hatching morning in May”” (188). It is a direct citation with an indication of both the author and the book’s title, and Smith uses quotation marks around the sentence. In the previous chapter, I have already posited that the stylistic influence of Virginia Woolf is conspicuous in *Summer*. On top of that Smith even includes the opening line of Woolf’s *Between the Acts* among the epigraphs: “It was a summer’s night and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden, about the cesspool” (Woolf 1969, 3).

Additionally, implicit intertexts are also abundant in *Summer*. For instance, the first line of its prologue alludes to the first line of *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* by Dickens, hence both begin with: “Everybody said so” (Dickens 1851). Albeit in Smith’s version it is followed by a question mark and includes a colon: “Everybody said: so?” (Smith 2020, 3). Besides transforming it, she also does not include a quotation mark or the author’s name, therefore the allusion is not as direct as in the previously examined examples of intertextuality. Hence its implicitness, the connection between the two texts is harder to identify and cannot be translated or understood as effortlessly as the explicit quotes. Another allusion to Dickens’s *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* can be found in Daniel’s letter to his sister, Hannah when he mentions that he read “[a] little Christmas story by Dickens too where a man asks a ghost to take his memory away so he will stop feeling sad about painful things the remembers” (188). This is a brief summary of the Dickens novel, but the novel’s title remains unrevealed, so that only those can understand it who are familiar with the book. Another implicit intertext can be found in Sacha’s second letter to Hero when she mentions a poem of Emily Dickinson.

However, she does not cite it, nor say the title of it, but indirectly refers to the main theme of it. The implicated poem “[s]ays (though it says more poetically than I am here) what would happen if you split a lark open?” (119). The referred and rephrased part of the original poem goes as:

Split the Lark – and you’ll find the Music –
Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled –
Scantly dealt to the Summer Morning
Saved for you Ear, when Lutes be old – (Dickinson 2005).

Influenced by the Dickinson poem, Sacha thinks that “[i]f you were to open a swift, metaphorically of course, the rolled-up message they carry inside them is the unfurled word S U M M E R” (119). Smith hints to the original poem by naming the poet and gives us a clue that it is about splitting a lark open, but she uses a reinvented version with swift instead of lark and summer instead of music. In his letter to Hannah, Daniel also recalls a Rilke poem, *Die Rosenschale*: “[I] thought of you when he was talking of the Rose Bowl” (189). He tries to translate it from German to English with the help of his memories:

but now you know how to forget about those things
because the rose bowl is here before you
and it cannot be forgotten, it is full
of being, the roses leaning forward,
holding out, never giving was, holding their own
so we too can go as far as we can, like the roses do (189).

Apart from the references to other literary pieces, there are intertexts from other media as well. I have already analysed the exhibitive nature of the *Quartet* by incorporating the fascinating stories of four female artists in the four books. Smith also includes an ekphrasis of Lorenzetti’s paintings by account of Elisabeth. Smith also revisits Barbara Hepworth’s art by uniting the child and mother stone piece of Hepworth’s sculpture, after Art gives it back to its rightful owner of the sculpture, Daniel. At the same time, the reappearance of Hepworth can also be interpreted as a self-reference, since Smith previously included her in *Winter*. Katherine Mansfield is also mentioned briefly in *Summer* when Elisabeth tells Daniel about a book on Rilke and Katherine Mansfield who “[l]ived near each other in Switzerland but never met” (161). Katherine Mansfield was the artist in *Spring* and the mentioning of the book is another

self-reference back to a character, Richard's film project in *Spring*, who worked on a film about Rilke and Mansfield living accidentally in the same hotel in a Swiss village in 1922.

To conclude, intertextuality is significant in Ali Smith's story for two different reasons. Firstly, the intertexts from novels of Charles Dickens and the plays of William Shakespeare links *Summer* to the other three seasonal novels, enhance the wholeness of the *Quartet*, and mirrors the interconnectedness of seasons in nature. This interconnectedness and linking nature of intertextuality also indicates *Summer*'s concluding position in the *Quartet*.

Secondly, the choice of intertexts employed by Smith in *Summer* also has a connection to the gist of the novel. Here, intertextuality helps to understand the chaotic events of today through the lenses of previous crisis, and functions as a bridge between different eras. According to Attila Kiss, William Shakespeare's dramas witnessed one of the most important turning points of social and cultural history, and people at that time experienced the collision of two completely different world models, the symbolical world model and the mechanic world model, and the gradual transition from the first one to the latter. This transition brought on uncertainty and an epistemological crisis among the society (Kiss 2007, 18–19, 136–137). Similarly to the Renaissance era, contemporary society experiences a knowledge and truth-seeking crisis. This crisis derives from the impacts of social media on truth perception, and the current political culture that appeals to emotions and beliefs instead of rationale and facts. These factors create similar anxiety and uncertainty in the post-truth society, as the world model change did in Shakespeare's time. Smith also questions the postmillennial generation's relationship with authenticity and credibility, when Sacha wants to use a quote for an essay, presumably from Hannah Arendt, but fails to give an evidence-backed and trusted source for this quote. Moreover, she does not see why her mother finds it problematic to use Brainyquote, Goodreads, or Facebook as a source in an academic paper, after all she says: [t]he internet is the primary source" (Smith 2020, 10). This is an accurate portrayal of the abovementioned knowledge crisis, and problematizes contemporary society's inability to distinguish between fake and true.

Smith's other important intertextual reference is Charles Dickens, who used fiction as a tool to criticise the injustices of the social, economic, and moral system in Victorian England. With *David Copperfield*, he brought to forefront the inequality of Victorian social classes, the hardships of the poor, the exploitation of children, the harsh reality of debtors' prisons, and the flaws in the legal system. In like manner, Smith comments and raises awareness of the contemporary social, economic, and moral problems in *Summer*. Through the Greenlaw family and the revisiting characters of Art and Charlotte, she sheds light to current issues, such as

climate change, the immigration crisis, the political division of the British nation after the Brexit referendum, the impact of social media and technology on knowledge, and the changes in human relationships because of the COVID-pandemic. In summary, apart from its connective power, the intertexts of Shakespeare and Dickens also invite the reader to explore the thematic connections between *Summer* and the works of the referred authors.

4. Genre Classification

4.1. Genre Analysis

In the previous chapters, I have examined the structural and narrative characteristics of the novel, and declared *Summer* as a postmodern novel. I have also provided a thematic analysis and concluded that *Summer* raises awareness of the contemporary social, political, and economic changes and their possible effects on society. As Johannes Wally says about the first seasonal novel, *Autumn*, it is about “[t]he identity crisis of the liberal, educated middleclass, who perhaps feel that they are no longer the cultural and political back-bone of western societies” (Wally 2018, 82), and so does *Summer*. The thematic analysis, in combination with the structural analysis, provides a ground for a genre classification. In terms of genre, *Summer* is hard to fit into one specific literary genre. It bears several characteristics of hysterical realism, climate fiction, and political fiction, although not in their pure form. Some might even consider it a feminist novel, as the state of women in the modern world is discussed on many occasions in the books. In the following section, I define each of the above-mentioned genres, and analyse their connection and similarity with *Summer*, while trying to determine the genre category most suited to the novel.

‘Hysterical Realism’ is a controversial literary term coined by literary critic, James Wood, who first used it in his critique of Zadie Smith’s debut novel, *White Teeth* in 2000. According to his definition, hysterical realism means a style of writing that combines realism with elements of absurdity, exaggeration, and multiple narrative voices (Wood 2000). Hysterical realist novels often feature sprawling narratives, intricate plots, and a mix of pop culture references and historical events. The portrayal of the world can be hyper-realistic, bizarre, yet familiar, which creates a cognitive dissonance in the reader’s mind. Wood also highlights the prevalence of shared universe and the exaggerated relatedness of everything to everything: “[e]ach of these novels is excessively centripetal. The different stories all intertwine, and double and triple on themselves. Characters forever see connections, links, plots, and paranoid parallels” (Wood 2000).

As for Ali Smith’s *Summer*, it undeniably has a non-linear plotline that involves multiple complex characters. She also works with numerous pop culture and contemporary cultural references, from the former UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, through the refugee crisis to environmental issues, while also referring to historical events of the Second World War through the memories of Daniel Gluck. In addition, all her seasonal novels are connected through a shared universe, since characters from other pieces of the *Seasonal Quartet* make a reappearance in *Summer*: Daniel Gluck and Elisabeth from *Autumn*, Arthur, Charlotte, and Iris

from *Winter*. However, the cyclical nature of her narration can be interpreted in parallel with the cyclicity of seasons: just like seasons, characters and topics revisit the storyline from time to time.

With the aforementioned in mind, *Summer* may fit into the term of hysterical realism. However, I have tested the term in my essay and I have two concerns about describing it as a hysterical realist fiction. Firstly, another major pillar of hysterical realist novels is that they depict unconvincing possibilities; the events that happen to the characters are far too unbearable, intolerable, and impossible in real life (Wood 2000). Smith does not include any event, action, or thought, whose occurrence or existence is impossible to imagine in real life. Some of the stories told in her book belong to the historical past, some in the realistic present, but none in an inconceivable parallel, hysterical universe. Secondly, I also disagree with using the term of exaggeration in connection with *Summer*. There are certain repetitive patterns, like the importance of art, trees, and nature in general, which could be read as an exaggeration. Although, as I have already posited, these themes have a linking function and they are also connected to the cyclicity of seasons, which served as an inspiration for Smith's *Quartet*. In conclusion, *Summer* definitely bears many key elements of hysterical realism, but it cannot be identified as an archetype of contemporary hysterical realistic writing.

Smith also raises awareness of recent environmental issues through the character of Sacha Greenlaw, the 16-year-old daughter of the Greenlaw family, who represents today's woke culture among Generation Z. She is an environmental activist, an avid fan, and a devoted follower of "mighty" Greta Thunberg. She refuses to travel by car, and has a terrifying and apocalyptic vision about the future of life on Earth. Therefore, I examine whether *Summer* is a climate fiction, because through the lenses of Sacha, Smith promotes attention to the importance of environmental protection. Climate fiction has appeared as a distinct genre over the past decade to answer the climate crisis concern (Bracke 2018, 5). Dan Bloom "[c]oined (the) term in 2007, cli-fi being short for 'climate fiction', described as a sub-genre of sci-fi" (Bloom 2007). Climate fiction is a genre of speculative fiction that examines the possible consequences of climate change and its effects on the environment and humanity. Climate fiction novels share characteristics of science fiction and dystopian literature. While science fiction or dystopian stories often use climate catastrophe narratives and post-apocalyptic, dystopian future societies in their universe, cli-fi is about highlighting the urgency of addressing climate change and serving as a reminder of the importance of preserving our fragile environment: "Unlike sci-fi, cli-fi writing comes primarily from a place of warning rather than discovery. There are no

spaceships hovering in the sky; no clocks striking 13. On the contrary, many of the horrors described seem oddly familiar” (Glass 2013).

However, they are all social commentaries and critics of certain political and social systems, climate fictions foremost encourage the readers to think about their choices and their impacts on the environment, whereas science fiction, and dystopias are speculative, disaster narratives, focusing on the aftermath of apocalyptic scenarios. The former is a literature of actions and preventions, the latter is a literature of ideas and consequences. In line with this, Smith’s *Summer* contains traces of ecocriticism and respectively social criticism, it lacks features of science fiction or dystopia, which are common attributes of many climate fiction works, such as Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* series, or Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (Bracke 2018, 45 and 60).

Another concern of labelling *Summer*, as a cli-fi is the effect of cli-fi novels, since they “[a]llow us to be briefly but intensely frightened: climate chaos is closer, more immediate, hovering over our shoulder like that murderer wielding his knife” (Glass 2013). Smith does not intend to frighten us. She rather makes readers think so that we can make the right choices about our future. Here, environmental protection is depicted as a burning, contemporary issue and a social responsibility of humankind in the twenty-first century. Smith creates a narrative that challenges the readers to reflect on their own role in shaping the future of our planet, without being speculative or terrifying.

4.2. Reading Ali Smith’s *Summer* as a Political Fiction

George Orwell, in his essay, *Why I Write* (1946) noted that “[n]o book is genuinely free from political bias” (Orwell 2004, 5). In the past decade, the shifting political landscape and events like Brexit or Donald Trump’s presidency led to the rise of political fiction. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, political fiction is “[a] novel with a political narrative or concerned with politics or political themes” (political novel, Oxford English Dictionary). As Johannes Wally argues, this loose definition may be applied to any novel. In his journal article “The Return of Political Fiction”, he differentiates between the political novel and politics in the novel. With that in mind, he offers a continuum that spans from “pure” political novels, such as Orwell’s *1984*, to those with subtle political elements, and this latter he calls “politics in a novel” (Wally 2018, 66–68). The boundary between the two lies in the degree of politics ruling the narration. The ubiquity of *politics* in *Summer* is undeniable. There are references to the “blond beast = UK prime minister” (Smith 2020, 54), Boris Johnson, and his infuriating article in *The Telegraph* when he compared Muslim women wearing burkas to letterboxes or bank

robbers (Johnson 2018). The comment led to an incident, witnessed by the mum of Sacha's friend:

She told me a terrific thing, about a man who stopped her mother in the street outside their dry cleaners and pretended he was trying to post a letter into her eyes then tried to get everyone passing in the street to laugh...He just looked like a lunatic. But it's what actually happened to them after that article. It made mad people go even madder (92).

Sacha recalls another incident that happened between a parent and a teacher in Robert's school: "[t]he teacher in Robert's school getting hit in the head with a brick because she sent kids home saying foreign words from other countries to their parents" (96). Similar attacks derive from extremist nationalism and xenophobia, which have been spreading rapidly and widely around the world. Smith draws a comparison between Daniel's experiences as a German citizen and his time in internment camps during the Second World War and today's hostility towards immigrants and their being kept in detention centres.

Moreover, racism is expressed in connection with the coronavirus, when Sacha says, "Stuff has gone viral online about Chinese people eating little yellow snakes on skewers. 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" (40). It is also presented in Sacha's text messages to her friend, Mel, whose grandmother is Chinese; Sacha is puzzled at the fact that "[t]here is no emoji she can think of that's an anti-racist emoji. There are probably loads of racist emojis, and nothing obvious to send someone who's been racistly done over" (41). Even George Floyd's tragic death is mentioned in Sacha's second letter to Hero when she writes that "every single person protesting what happened to George Floyd" (247) should be considered as a hero. Further, a critique of current populist movements and Trump's white supremacy is expressed when Sacha watches an evangelic rally on the TV, and Mercy Bucks, talks about "A great white throne" and says things like "God cleared our president's name with every breath our president takes" (20–21). When Sacha talks about masks and taking them off, she states that everybody wears masks nowadays, but the real mask is the one that is worn by the planets' liars, which is an innuendo to today's politicians.

With regard to today's socio-political climate, the sinister corporation SA4A, featured in all volumes of the *Quartet*, reappears in the book. They run the controversial detention centre where Hero is held as an asylum seeker. SA4A stands for the faceless, automaton megacorporations. Along with the concealment of the true self by 'masks' in the post-truth

world, the made-up company serves as a symbol of the fear of today's unknown, mysterious, police-like firms that monitor and examine every digital footstep of the citizens to provide protection and create the false feeling of security in people. The postmodernist phenomenon of bureaucratic alienation is depicted in Grace's experience with SA4A POWER, a branch of the same company that Art works for in *Winter* and the one that runs immigration centres across the country. Once, their power branch accompanied by a bailiff and a locksmith locked Grace out of her own home and she was almost evicted, due to some error in electricity billing (Smith 2020, 104).

Although *Autumn* was hailed as the first Brexit novel, without explicitly using the word itself, in *Summer* Smith uses the term frequently. On top of that, the Greenlaw's children blame the referendum for their parents' separation, even if Grace tries to deny it: "[o]ur fight, my disagreement with my husband, was nothing to do with what I voted for and all to do with father meeting Ashley", even though "[h]e didn't meet Ashley till 2018. And he moved out in 2016" (Smith 2020, 82).

Noticeably, most of the political criticism and opinion is formed by Sacha in the novel. She, being only sixteen, represents the next generation. Her thinking is moving forward, and she is opposite her mother, who prefers to live in her nostalgic memories. Sacha's political statements and involvement with environmental protection, her concerns about the status of the homeless, and her interest in Hero's condition in the immigrant camp can be interpreted as a ray of hope. She has the potential and attitude to contribute to a better, harmonious, and more enlightened future. On the other hand, her brother is a fan of Dominic Cummings and is drawn to right-wing politics. The siblings' stark opposition mirrors their parents' taking opposite sides in the Brexit vote, and is an illustration of the nation's division due to the referendum.

Summer won the Orwell Prize for political fiction in 2021, which is awarded to books that "come closest to George Orwell's ambition 'to make political writing into an art'" ("The Orwell Prizes 2024"). Smith turns politics into art, by writing about it, and vice versa, art can change the contemporary viewpoints of society, hence become political. *Summer* is political in a way, as another Orwell Prize winner, Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* is, since both novels use fiction to depict moral dilemmas and to criticise the injustice of society and the authorities. While Keegan's novel commemorates the Magdalene Laundries, it also discusses small things like human kindness and bravery. Similarly, besides political criticism, Smith explores the themes of benevolence, and acts of resistance. The moral of both novels is how quiet heroism can fight against the injustice of the political, religious, and social repression. Correspondingly, Sacha says in his letter to Hero that "[t]he modern sense of being a hero is

like shining bright light on things that need to be seen” (Smith 2020, 247). Smith does the same in *Summer*, she enlightens the readers about concerns that should be seen and handled, if not by politicians, then by responsible communities, or by individual quiet heroes. Politics and the acts of those who have power over a community play an important role in *Summer*, and contribute to the broader discourse on contemporary politics. Yet, the key political message of Smith is to act right, even if it is not rewarded or seems as a useless attempt against those “[w]ho knew the power of saying so?” (4).

Lastly, the feminist novel as a genre category should be considered regarding *Summer*. The feminist interpretation of the novel is closely connected to the category of political fiction. Back in 2015, in a Guardian interview, Smith said “[m]y nature is feminist. How could you not be? The world is full of brilliant, interesting women” (Higgins, 2015). She often uses complex female characters and delves into the question of female identity in many of her books. According to Roxane Gay:

A feminist novel, then, is one that not only deals explicitly with the stories and thereby the lives of women; it is also a novel that illuminates some aspect of the female condition and/or offers some kind of imperative for change and/or makes a bold or unapologetic political statement in the best interests of women (Gay 2014).

This political statement characteristic feature is one of the attributes of Smith’s novel. However, the history of defining the feminist novel and the women-centered fiction is not the task of my paper. I use this term restrictedly by highlighting the women-centered themes Smith’s novel covers. Rosalind Coward provides a working definition of the feminist novel by describing its essential functions. The novels of this category can be strongly connected to the women’s liberation movement, or they encounter the milieu and aspirations of feminism, which is a central element in the narrative of these fictions. Consciousness-raising, the reconstruction of personal histories within a group of women, forms the novel’s structure. The feminist character of the book is given not because of its content but of the other political writings of the author. Finally, the content is not about the milieu of contemporary feminism but focuses on the experience of women’s oppression (Coward 1990, 155–156). Nancy Armstrong offers a gender-related category for feminist novels by differentiating the strategies through which novels produce forms of femininity and masculinity (Armstrong 2006, 105–107).

Throughout the *Quartet*, Smith introduces many strong and complex female characters and displays the struggles of modern womanhood. The idea of fighting against injustice

reverberates in all four books. Iris, who revisits *Summer* from *Winter*, is a famous activist university alumnus, who fights for equality, and is represented as a feminist character. In *Summer* she plans to take in homeless people and those who are in deprivation during the pandemic. She wants to create a community lockdown without locks on doors and isolation or social distancing. We also learn that Hannah, Daniel's deceased sister, used to work for the French resistance during the Second World War and helped people to cross the border. Sacha, who belongs to a new generation of feminists, expresses her doubts about having a child: "She already knows she is never going to have children. Why would you bring a child into a catastrophe? It would be like giving birth to a child in a prison cell" (26). Her feeling of insecurity about bringing a child into this world, in the face of climate change, the state of society, and the current socio-political climate, mirrors the anxieties and hesitancy of many women. Grace also considers herself a feminist, or at least, she mentions she was in her youth when she took part in a theatre group tour in the summer of 1989. They did their own feminist version of *David Copperfield* with a focus on the female characters in the book. In real life, Smith is also a notable supporter of other women artists. Likewise, in her *Quartet*, she holds a public display for four female artists, respectively the painter Pauline Boty, the sculptor Barbara Hepworth, the author Katherine Mansfield and the filmmaker, Lorenza Mazetti.

In connection to the female condition, Smith also raises awareness of the discrimination and atrocities women meet with even in the emancipated Western world. For example, the previously mentioned attack of the Muslim woman after the racist comments of Boris Johnson on burkas, or the incident between Grace and SA4A that could only be solved upon the intervention of his husband. In light of these examples, *Summer* deals with the identity of women and the atrocities towards women, nevertheless, in Gay's words, "[t]he concerns of women and womanhood" are not "[t]he alpha and the omega of the narrative" (Gay 2014). The life and identity of Robert or Daniel are as important as Sacha's or Grace's; thus, the topic of womanhood does not overtly rule the narrative. Instead, the pivots of the narrative are how people look at art, how they experience time, and how everyone and everything is connected in this world.

Considering the previous examples, *Summer* does not fit perfectly into one or another genre. In this chapter, I have concluded that the interconnectedness and the disjointed narrative of hysterical realism characterise Smith's *Summer*, though it lacks the convoluted and exaggerated nature of the genre. I have also identified the marks of climate fiction in *Summer*, such as ecocriticism and the expression of urgency to take actions against climate crisis. However, by applying Glass's view on climate fiction, it is not a representative of climate

fiction, as Smith does not intend to evoke a fear of climate catastrophe in the reader; rather she aims to increase public awareness and concern about the threats of climate change to human society and natural ecosystems. Furthermore, I have argued that Smith gives voice to the concerns of womanhood as authors in feminist novels do. Since *Summer* has strong political intimations, it criticises those who are in power and calls for protest, I consider it an experimental piece of real-time political fiction. Even if Smith crosses the borders of genres and melts the characteristics of each aforementioned genre into a literary collage, *Summer* fundamentally carries a political message.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of my work was to provide an analysis and interpretation of *Summer*, the concluding piece of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*. In the first part of my argument, I examined Smith's narrative style and drew a comparison with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. I concluded that Smith uses techniques similar to Woolf's to portray the multiple thoughts and feelings that pass through the human mind in under a second. By this, the omniscient narrator gives the readers an opportunity to have an insight into the character's inner monologues and private speech. I have also analysed Smith's narrative time travelling, similar to Woolf's in *Orlando* or *Mrs. Dalloway*. However, I argued that despite Smith's novel being similar in its narratological tools to Woolf's modernist, it is postmodernist. To support my argument, I have indicated that as in many postmodern novels, the story is built up from shattered pieces of memories, real events, inner thoughts, and conversations of the characters. This fragmentation also mirrors the contemporary uncertainty and anxieties of the society. Along with the deconstruction of structural conventions, the language distortion and the blending of pop culture and high culture references further emphasise the novel's postmodernity.

Then I discussed Smith's tendency to cross conventions and analysed three types of limits that she destructed in her novel: temporal, gender, and formal limits. Firstly, I compared Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Smith's *Summer* again, in terms of temporal distortion. Both novels jump back and forth in time, yet create a fixed point to connect the different timelines and characters – in the case of *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is Big Ben, and in *Summer*, it is the season of summer itself. Secondly, I have discussed the destabilisation of gender boundaries and compared it to Woolf's *Orlando*. In Woolf's novel, *Orlando* becomes a woman overnight and in a similar way, Hannah reincarnates in the body of Robert in *Summer*. Thirdly, I have examined Smith's rule-breaking approach to literary or formal restrictions. She blends the private and public voice of the characters, but does not distinguish expressively, with quotation marks or italics, which one is which. Again, I have included many elements of postmodernism in the analysis and concluded that temporal distortion, fragmentation, language disorder, and multiperspectivity are omnipresent in Smith's text and can be declared typical postmodern features of the novel.

In the second main part of my argumentation, I started a thematic analysis and contemplated the recurring motifs, the power of art, and the importance of nature, which are prevalent throughout the *Seasonal Quartet*. In the second part of the chapter, I have examined the explicit and implicit intertexts in Smith's writing, including the seasonal reappearance of selected Shakespearean plays and Dickens novels, peppered with self-references to other volumes of the *Quartet* through Rilke and Katherine Mansfield. I also analysed the novel's intertextual

references to non-literary, transmedia products, such as the films of Lorenza Mazetti and Charlie Chaplin or the sculpture of Barbara Hepworth. I have concluded that the significance of these cyclical patterns and intertexts is to connect the seasonal novels and also with the self-references to the previous volume, to emphasise the concluding position of *Summer* within the *Quartet*.

In the third main part of my argumentation, I analysed the question of genre. I tried to categorise *Summer* into one of the four suitable, selected genres: hysterical realist novel, political novel, climate fiction and feminist novel. I have presented a definition for each notion, listed their key features, and drew parallels between each genre's characteristics and their presence in *Summer*. I have argued that despite the fact that *Summer* bears features of all four genres, it is an experimental political fiction. Experimental, because it was written in real-time, and its contemporaneity is closer to journalism than to literary writing, and political because it holds an important political message and forms criticism about the current political climate.

Smith demonstrates in her novel that the mistakes of the past can teach humankind lessons in the present and determine its mission in the future. In a way, *Summer* is a call for action that does not let the readers escape from reality but rather alerts them to problems of contemporary society, be it xenophobia, political anomalies, climate change, pandemics and wars, mass media influence, or atrocities against women. Since what is in the news? "Thugs and showmen in power. Nothing new. A clever virus" (Smith 2020, 160). Smith warns us against negligence, an endemic of these times, both in her prologue and through the caring nature of Sacha towards immigrants and the homeless or the humane camaraderie of Iris during the pandemic. *Summer*, with its news snippets, teenage daydreams, centenarian memories, letters between friendly strangers, and ekphrases of Mazetti's works, created a snapshot of the confused, chaotic, and extraordinary time of now. Yet, Smith also spread the warmth and light of summer by finishing her novel on a high note and putting her little remaining trust in human kindness. In the words of Stanley Kubrick in one of the Epigraphs of *Summer*, "However vast the darkness, we must supply our own light" (Smith 2020). To finish my paper, I turn to the opening question with which Smith challenges the reader: Whether we shall turn out to be the hero of *our* own life. That is the thought-provoking question Smith wants the readers to answer by placing the last jigsaw puzzle of the four seasons.

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