

## BOOK REVIEWS

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**Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), 264.**

In a country apparently divided against itself, a writer such as Smith ... is more valuable than a whole parliament of politicians.<sup>1</sup>

Ali Smith wrote *Autumn* in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum which led to Brexit, or Britain exiting from the European Union. ‘... People waking up feeling cheated ... no matter what they voted’ (p. 197). British society became polarised, just like many other countries after 9/11. Thus, Smith’s work cuts across boundaries of space and time, and achieves universal relevance.

The story is basically about friendship between old Daniel Gluck and child Elisabeth Demand. They are both ‘queens’ (p. 52), Daniel because he may be gay and Elisabeth because she may trigger change in local politics. In the narrative, Daniel is near death but he has trained Elisabeth to help restore life, sanity and beauty to the world. Elisabeth’s mother Wendy understands the magic of their bond. She recollects the story’s primary image that Elisabeth, despite her vivid reminiscences, had forgotten: Daniel and Elisabeth sitting in a box of light in his backyard watching movies on starry summer nights (p. 215).

Wendy also articulates the politics following the Brexit vote wherein, ‘half their village isn’t speaking to the other half’ (p. 54). This is followed by three full pages of contradictory sentences that emphasise the social divide:

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Preston, “Autumn by Ali Smith-The First Serious Brexit Novel,” review of *Autumn*, by Ali Smith, *Financial Times*, October 14, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/0e227666-8ef4-11e6-a72e-b428cb934b78>.

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 they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won (pp. 59-61).

The long description compels the reader to apply this narrative to other countries, at other times.

Smith uses repetition to create a collage of images that is both aesthetically pleasing and politically potent. Xenophobia is a recurrent theme in *Autumn* and she 'pastes' it periodically into her narrative, especially as it engulfs post-Brexit Britain (p. 53).

Someone has spray-painted the words "GO HOME" on the house of a family presumably believed to be immigrants. A mysterious barbed-wire enclosure has sprung up nearby, heavy with security cameras and patrolled by guards (p. 55).

About half way through the novel, 'Passing the house with the "GO HOME" graffiti, Elisabeth sees that the words "WE ARE ALREADY HOME THANK YOU" have been painted right underneath, along with a tree and bright red flowers. A number of bouquets of real flowers have been left outside, as if in solidarity with and sympathy for the occupants' (p. 138). Towards the end, the house has been spray-painted blue with 'home' still faintly visible under the paint (p. 253).

Blue signifies peace, trust and loyalty; green represents rejuvenation; and red hope, especially red roses that still bloom. Ali Smith also plays with words: still (pp.35-36) and collage/collage (p. 71). She uses rare words to challenge the reader's intellect: indubitable; perspicacious (p. 51); maudlin (pp. 234-35); alacrity (p. 257); explains the etymology of names (pp.50-52); she puns with words as living organisms or Oregano-isms (p. 69), and invents the game of bagatelle (pp.120-121) that pulls together her collage of etymology, symbolism, live words that divide or unite people or the generations, and more.

Smith's methodology is basically the 'fractured form.' Wendy represents T.S. Eliot's imagery of *The Waste Land*<sup>2</sup> being a collector of antiques, in other words, waste. Wendy enters a television show about finding items of value in junk. There, she finds love. The junkshop contains an immense heap of things, so frighteningly fragile that one wrong step would make it come crashing down. Finally, Wendy uses her junk to hurl it as missiles against her village's new razor-wired electric fence. The fence cordons off public land, divides the people, and symbolises state xenophobia.

A bunch of thugs have been singing ... Britannia rules the waves. First we'll get the Poles. And then we'll get the Muslims. ... (p. 197).

Smith inextricably intertwines politics and pure fiction and creates great literature. She also time travels effortlessly, and superimposes upon the description of a 2015 movie shoot of the scene of a 1943 Nazi roundup of Jewish women (pp. 60-63). This juxtaposition of parallel but historically removed events is time present in time past or vice versa in T.S. Eliot's terms. The notion of hard ground realities articulated through the fractured, surrealistic form comes to near perfection in Smith's wordplay that mimics lists – *EU Campaign consulted TV hypnotist.... The Power To Influence. I Can Make You Happy. ... Being engrossed in TV broadcasts equally hypnotic. Facts don't work. Connect with people emotionally. Trump.* (p.137). The overall reference is to Donald Trump as a reality show host.

Ali Smith's writing style makes it possible to read her according to diverse personal preferences and/or political agendas, for example, climate change. She also comments on right-wing nationalism, the Twenty-First Century security state and, as Preston observes, she 'feels like a genial guide leading us through a torrent of ideas — about art, history, literature, feminism, memory.' Highly intellectual, Smith is, nevertheless, not highbrow as she gently explains her plentiful references.

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<sup>2</sup> Namara Smith, "Omens of Disaster," review of *Autumn*, by Ali Smith, *Nation*, March 29, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/ali-smith-novel-review-omens-of-disaster/>.

Does the image of old Daniel dying reflect Eliot's Fisher King? Britain and Brexit? Is it Europe and migrants? Global xenophobia? Societies divided about extremists, race, refugees, ethnicities, Islam, homophobia? Readers are charmed by Smith's writing style and her optimism: girls named Elisabeth, spelt with 's' and not 'z,' are destined to become queens, who will joyfully rejuvenate the divided, wounded land – 'The wild joyful brightness painted on the front of that house in a dire time' makes Elisabeth think about color, aesthetics, and exciting things that she can do, *even if she loses her job* (emphasis added).

Smith welcomes us into her highly readable *Autumn*, peppering it with accessible British humour. In it we learn how important it is to befriend all kinds of people; how to appreciate the beauty of life. We are empowered to reshape our fragile world and demolish fences that divide people:

Whoever makes up the story makes up the world, so always try to welcome people into the home of your story (p. 100).

*Reviewed by Dr Rukhsana Qamber, an academic.*

**Michael R. Auslin, *The End of the Asian Century: War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World's Most Dynamic Region* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 304.**

Michael R. Auslin, a former History Professor at Yale University, is a Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research in Washington, D.C., USA. In his recent publication, *The End of the Asian Century: War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World's Most Dynamic Region*, Auslin maintains the view that while Asia seems to be a dynamic and peaceful region, the continent is actually riddled with various unseen threats ranging from economic stagnation to political unrest and growing military tensions. He writes that the intent behind this book was to relate America's future with a resurgent Indo-Pacific (a variant of the former United States Secretary of State (2009-13) Hillary Clinton's proposed 'America's Pacific Century'), but instead he came across extensive risks in Asia that are completely ignored by the West. Through the creation of 'risk maps' and identification of 'risk regions', Auslin tries to explore the factors that threaten Asia's future and put at risk the very imagined, 'Asian Century' (p. 09). Overall, Auslin regards China central to all the problems, primarily related to the economy and security in the region. Regarding terminology, the author believes that the traditional definition of Asia needs to be expanded (p. 11), for which, out of terms like Asia, Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific, he has extensively used the latter.

Auslin believes that the global future increasingly looks Asian as prospects of economic growth and political development are bright, if compared with the strife-torn Middle East, ageing Europe or crisis-beset Africa, but maintains that no place is free of economic challenges, conflict and adversity specifically when it is as large, crowded and diverse as Asia (pp. 15-16). He further maps out five discrete yet interrelated risk regions which include i) the threat to Asia's growth due to the end of its economic miracle and the failure to reform; ii) demographic issues, termed as 'Goldilocks Dilemma'; iii) Asia's political immaturity and unfinished revolutions; iv) lack of rudimentary sense of 'Asia-ness' or regional unity; and, v) threat of war and prospects for peace. Auslin views emergence of

China in Asia as a revisionist power, which is seeking to define regional rules of behaviour and confronting those neighbours with which it has disagreements, thereby, becoming an immediate cause of insecurity in the region.

While discussing the concept of Asian Miracle, Auslin believes that Asian countries (developed or developing alike), face significant challenges including maintaining their economic health for the next generation. Within this large region of risk, four areas stand out: i) the apparent end of China's stampeding economic growth; ii) the difficulty for mature economies like Japan in transitioning to a post-industrial future; iii) inability of Southeast Asian countries to become stable, middle-class societies; and, iv) India's continuing development drama (p. 28).

In the particular case of China, the problem lies in the dramatic slowdown of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth. Given the circumstances, some authors do not see one China, rather many Chinas coexisting, such as the description of the 'Nine Nations of China' whereby each is geographically and economically discrete. Auslin highlights that among other taxonomies, the most relatable one is the existence of two Chinas, one modern and developed, very much integrated with the outer world, while the other, traditional and still developing but largely isolated from global trends (p. 32). More so, the Indo-Pacific economies have common denominators (primarily lack of political will) of failed economic reforms across the region (p. 57).

As he further dwells into the risk region of political immaturity in Asia, he notes that the Indo-Pacific as a region confounds American understanding of the natural path of political development. It is assumed that Asia's political path forward seems to be dependent on how China continues to grow at home and ultimately comes out to dominate the region (p. 81). If one peels off the layers of Asia's entire political persona, it would range from China's repressive political system, Japan's rigid political manoeuvring to somewhat liberal and integrated but corrupt democracy in South Korea. In Southeast Asia, political stability and development remain overriding concerns with the domestic politics of countries still transitioning towards democracy and modernisation, with *de facto* one-party democracies remaining the dominant form of government

(p. 98), such as the case of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. More than the political system, Auslin believes that 'sectarianism' could present a threat to states like Indonesia, Malaysia and India. He notes that authoritarian governments in Asia have long provided both security and economic rewards in return for political passivity of their citizens (p. 109).

While discussing the alliance system in Asia, Auslin marks regional diversity as the primary reason which has prevented nations from uniting the way Europe or other regions have. While equating Asia's inability to come up with its own alliance and follow the success of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Auslin hypothesises that the more democracies a region has alongside the presence of shared interests, the more likely they are to develop multilateral political institutes to remain politically stable. He remarks that independence and sovereignty are relatively newer concepts in Asian historical consciousness, given its past which is deeply absorbed in colonialism and war. Auslin questions why even in the presence of key American allies who are part of global alliances, stable democracies have not been able to come up with a joint political leadership initiative? The answer to this question lies in the clear retrospection of the kind of bilateral relations developed countries have with each other.

On the role of regional organisations, Auslin views Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its headquarters as a perfect symbol of Asia's lack of political community. Its subsequent rise from ASEAN to ASEAN+3 and ASEAN+8, clearly bring forward the efforts of Japan to neutralise the dominance of China. Such Japanese practices are also obvious from it being the only non-signatory country of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the monetary structure China proposed to upend regional reliance over the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and The World Bank (p. 131).

Given the growing trade and wealth in the region, it could be deduced that Indo-Pacific states are busy in making money instead of wasting time on territorial disputes or building military might (p. 134) - which is not the case at all. With Asia-Pacific being the most militarised region in the world, holding some powerful militaries and nuclear powers in the presence of American bases, conflict appears just as likely as is continued stability. The conflict between Pakistan-India, perturbed Korean

Peninsula, territorial dispute between China and India, unsettled relations between Taiwan and China, and growing security concerns in South China Sea are examples which support the above argument. Since Auslin considers China the prime unbalancing factor in the region, he also highlights its cyber-combat strategy to be the next new face of warfare.

After mapping the risk regions in Asia, Auslin concludes the book by suggesting ways to manage these risks. He writes that in the absence of any successful intra-Asian approach, an outside power can be helpful in redrawing the map of security risk such as the United States (p. 165). He advocates this idea as the US has maintained a major military presence in the Indo-Pacific for over seven decades, alongside the sustenance of its alliance system as well. President Obama's Pivot to Asia policy and initiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) stand out as relevant examples. Whereby, these strategies work to single out China, they also provide Beijing enough reasons to continue its economic and military buildup and prevent any other power from emerging as a regional power.

In today's world, China has seemingly grasped global attention with its soft policy which works to engage countries economically. In this book, Auslin has succinctly handled a vast subject like Asia by briefly covering social, economic and security-related issues. More so, he has brought forward a perspective little known and heard. The rise of Asia has occurred over the last few decades, while global powers like the US, have a history to learn lessons from. And obviously, states in Asia would learn some too, over the passage of time. But for the moment, no one can stop China from exerting its influence in the region as it never happened in the case of the United States, when it exercised the same globally. On the whole, for a quick and well-informed glance at Asian politics and other dimensions, Auslin's work is certainly a critical scholarly addition, students of international relations and politics can consult.

*Reviewed by Maryam Nazir, Assistant Research Officer at the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) in Islamabad, Pakistan.*