

Gendered Narratives in BrexLit: A Study of Sam Byers's *Perfidious Albion*

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Abstract

*Gender issue in Brexit discourses is a gorilla in the room – an obvious yet unaddressed topic of discussion. Britain's withdrawal of membership from the European Union has given birth to a new subgenre, BrexLit, a variation of the Condition-of-England novels. The socio-political and economic ramifications of this watershed, as reflected in Brexit novels, have been critiqued. However, gender issues in Brexit novels are still unexplored. This paper undertakes a textual analysis of Sam Byers's 2018 novel *Perfidious Albion*, which is considered as a major BrexLit and attempts to showcase cyber sexism prevalent in the contemporary scenario in Britain. Byers's narrative foregrounds a dystopic vision of contemporary Britain. It archives how both old and new media are used unethically to create a xenophobic, anti-immigrant toxicity. This paper investigates how the process of political de-Europeanisation aggravates backlash. Attempts have been made to unearth how, in the backdrop of this narrative, the victims retaliate against diverse misogynies and offer narratives of empowerment and female solidarity.*

Keywords: Brexlit, cyber sexism, women empowerment, xenophobic, female solidarity

Introduction

Trailblazing political movements have been delineated in creative literature, especially novels. British novels' engagement with politics is age-old. Brexit, the severing of British membership from the European Union, has inaugurated a new sub-genre, BrexLit. Robert Eaglestone opines that Brexit in nature is not merely "political, economic and administrative: perhaps most significantly it is an event in culture, too" (1). Kristian Shaw observes, "BrexLit concerns fiction that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain's exit from the EU or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal" (18). The present study undertakes a close textual analysis of the 2018 Brexit novel, *Perfidious Albion* by Sam Byers to underscore how it simulates the toxic androcentrism of contemporary Britain.

As a state-of-the-nation novel, *Perfidious Albion* powerfully depicts the reign of cyber sexism as rampant in British and global digital spaces. The virtual space that ought to have been democratic and free from the five-fold stratifications of class, caste, race, gender, and religion, features a unique gendered violence where the main targets are women. Online misogyny, otherwise known as digital technology-facilitated violence (DTF), "mediated misogyny", "digitally facilitated sexual violence", "online slut shaming" is a continuum of violence perpetrated against women in real-life scenarios. Baider and Kopytowska identify cyber

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misogyny as a byproduct of heteronormativity and masculinism. It aims at creating male dominance, sexual objectification of women, and erasing women's existences from the virtual sphere. Online misogyny varies from name-calling, trolling, sexting, image manipulation, privacy violation, bullying, body shaming, hate speech, to rape threats, death threats, etc. Even in the second and third decades of the twenty-first century, a major and pronounced gender gap is to be located in internet usage. The digital world is perceived as a masculine province and women are treated as trespassers.

Online misogyny is rampant in contemporary real-life Britain. Caroline Criado Perez, for her campaign to compel the Bank of England reconsider their verdict to have an all-male line up on bank notes, was tweeted "KISS YOUR PUSSY GOODBYE AS WE BREAK IT IRREPARABLY" and "if your friends survived rape they were not raped properly" (qtd. in Kopytowska 24). Similarly when Stella Creasy, the labour MP of Britain, supported Caroline Criado Perez, Creasy too became a victim of misogynist vitriol. Various agencies reported that within a single weekend there was a huge upsurge of rape and death threats against her. Similarly, British Labour MP Jess Phillips received 5,000 Twitter notifications (including 600 threatening of rape in a single evening) of sexual assault. Diane Abbott, the first Black MP of the UK, received about 8,000 abusive tweets in the first six months of her term in 2017. Nussbaum in 2012 drew attention to the precarious condition of women in cyberspace. These are enough to understand that cyberspace is littered with sexualized violence. Monika Kopytowski in her 2021 study refers to the Inter-Parliamentary Union Studies between 2016 and 2018 that unearth how female parliamentary workers became victim of violence. The 2018 studies show 85.2% of surveyed parliamentary women members are victims of psychological violence, while 46.9% emerge as recipient of rape threats, and 67.9% are victims of body shaming.

The practice is so widespread that it doesn't spare women as significant as Angela Merkel, the only woman to serve as the Chancellor of Germany and Ewa Kopacz, the Polish Prime Minister (2014-2015). Gendered political personages, irrespective of their ranks, become targets for their pro-refugee stances. In their concerned studies, Kopytowska, Grabowski, and Wozniak (2017) taking a cue from the CONTACT project, show how Angela Merkel and Ewa Kopacz are frequently subjected to cis-hetero hate speeches. Merkel, described by Forbes in 2019 as "the most powerful woman in the world" was castigated for her 2015 August pro-refugee policy in Germany. She was made a butt of demeaning sexualized comments and body shaming. Her name was distorted as 'Makrela' and 'Merkel' and was body shamed by expressions like "Gruba Berta," 'Tlusta,' 'Slepa,' 'Kurdupel' etc. Kopacz, estimated by Forbes magazine in 2015 as the 40th most important woman in the world, was subjected to name-calling and body shaming. 'Podla,' 'Zasvana,' 'Polski' (Polish reptile), 'Stara baba,' 'Kurwa' (Whore), 'Suka' (bitch) are some of the pejorative titles attributed to her for her consent to admit two thousand refugees to Poland as a response to the EU relocation program.

Discussion

Sam Byers' second novel *Perfidious Albion* depicts how contemporary Britain continues and reinforces its sexist culture inspired by a weird form of national self-flagellation. The title itself, a nickname earned by the UK in international politics, connotes hypocrisy, and infidelity in pursuit of self-interest. The name 'Albion', a derivative from Latin 'Albus' is an English male name highlighting androcentrism. This media dystopia reveals how the powerful male

politicians grab old and new media and create a xenophobic, sexist, anti-immigrant ambience, highly toxic and menacing. In the Brexit campaign, both the Leavers and the Remainers grabbed the media to further their ends unethically. The media preaches in favour of a white-dominated Englishness and showcases the white male plight. Whereas Ali Smith's novel *Autumn*, the maiden attempt as Brexit novel, relies on the restorative power of time, *Perfidious Albion* shows that Britain is stranded in the quagmire of xenophobia and hate politics.

Perfidious Albion simulates Brexit Britain in its production of a sexist, fearful ambience. In Byers's narrative, "England Always" is portrayed as a nativist party, the fictive version of UKIP and "Project Fear" of the campaign for EU Referendum in 2016 is resonated through the scaremongering performances of "the Griefers." In the narrative, the first fearful ambience is to be located in the literary meet surrounding the masked, supposedly androgynous persona. His looks and the mysterious words, "May third. . . Twelve seventeen a.m. WWW dot teen sluts dot com. Who am I?" (13) and "May seventh. . . Eleven thirty-six pm. WWW dot balls deep in burkha dot com. Who am I?" (13) and the printed black and white words: "What Don't You Want to Share? First Disruption. The Square. Friday. 8pm. WWW.WEAREYOURFACE.COM" (14) are suggestive of the Griefers' attempts to spread menace. Through the masked androgynous looks and the reference to "burkha dot com", the person wanted to spread a negative attitude. The phrase "burkha dot com" is an obvious reference to a traditional Muslim outfit. Sara S. Farris's concept of femonationalism discusses how right-wing politics in collusion with neoliberalism justify their anti-Muslim immigrant stance. Strategically, they try to justify that to a gender-friendly, egalitarian Western society, Muslim immigrants are threats.

Femonationalism tries to showcase the subjugation of Muslim women at the hands of Muslim patriarchy only to further its own ends. Byers showcases how a mysterious person, by adopting the look of a sexual other, and referring to "burkha dot com", obliquely wants to indicate that a Muslim immigrant doesn't match with the essential heteronormativity. The analysis underscores how right-wing politics weaponizes islamophobia to develop an anti-immigrant rhetoric. A Muslim immigrant with a different sexual orientation is a threat to white womanhood. The Griefers, later on revealed as a support system of right-wing politics, strategically spreads this anti-immigrant sentiment. The reference to "May third. . . Twelve seventeen a.m. WWW dot teen sluts dot com. Who am I?" (13) and "May seventh. . . Eleven thirty-six pm. WWW dot balls deep in burkha dot com. Who am I?" (13) and the printed black and white words: "What Don't You Want to Share? First Disruption. The Square. Friday. 8pm. WWW.WEAREYOURFACE.COM" (14, italics mine) having resonance of the exact timings of bomb attacks may be a ploy to draw attention to the destructiveness of Islam.

Byers depicts how Edmundsbury experiences a strange fear. Though the police presence is till date non-invasive, the officers standing at the edges of the small crowd induces an aura of surveillance. The black transit van round the corner creates tension among the people and the people mark their positioning and their projectors. One of the projectors puts on view naked women body, "her hand reaching back through her legs to her vagina" (69), another displays one almost naked teenage girl and the image of the erected cock "bulging out of the top of the fist" along with the inscription "we are the Griefers . . . We want to ask you . . . What don't you want to share . . . We are your face" (69-70). It also displays the image of an email with redacted sender and recipient and blurred texts. The image dissolves in a slow fade, replaced by a screenshot of a bank account details, and reveals the back half of the redacted addresses and

the image of men and women matched with recognizable faces. Finally, in a close shot appears a series of unredacted profile pictures fading into one another and becoming each other. This veiled threat of revealing personal details, identities, and sexual details is ominous.

The analysis showcases how in the corpus of the narrative “a near dystopian vision of England” (24) is broadcasted through media to incite fear regarding immigration. Immigrants are viewed as encroaching upon the prerogatives of the natives. Completely avoiding the issue of immigrants’ contribution to the economy and culture, their presence is interpreted as threatening. The gendered immigrants are held responsible for the spread of permissiveness and moral turpitude. While femonationalism usually demonizes a racialized male immigrant, in the select novel, a gendered immigrant is held responsible for spreading promiscuity. Bennington and Teddy grab an opportune moment when Trina, a coloured immigrant employee at *The Green*, tweets: #Whitemalegenocide.lol (137). Trina’s flippant tweet reflects her ireful reaction to Hugo Bennington waxing about the plight of white male and the liberal constraints of mainstream media on their freedom of speech. To bolster the racist messages of his platform, Teddy uses it unscrupulously. The social media, instigated by Teddy and Hugo, heavily troll Trina and portray her as a racist terrorist ready to swoop on persons like Darkin, an aged undefended white man. Trina’s past history of “confrontation and physical violence” (174) and her ethnic minority status place her in a vulnerable situation. Her retaliation, with her partner, is translated as “violence against man” (174). She is witch-hunted by her colleagues to know the racial status of her partner. The interview session by two anonymous officials of *The Green* unveils that the so-called demand for assimilation and integration is mere tokenism and England’s pride as a migrant-tolerant country is purposive and self-gratulatory. Trina could perceive that whatever is happening is not taking place because of what she had said, rather behind the smug surface, there is “paranoid conspiracy” (186) because of her ethnic minority and gender status:

The cause of what was happening was far bigger than a tweet. It was structural, historical. She hadn’t caused the vitriol that was being directed at her. The vitriol was extant, searching for a place to put itself. Hugo Bennington needed to pretend he was arguing solely with her in order to hide the fact that he was arguing with everyone he thought of as being like her. . . (201-202)

As vilification continues, her family is termed unnatural and she is described in *The Record* as “living in some sort of sex commune” (209). Trina’s victimization can be termed as an example of “cyber racism” (Jakubowicz 2017) showcasing the interface between misogyny and xenophobia. Critics across nations have discussed at length the interconnection between heteronormativity and nation-building discourses. Just as miscegenation in various countries was an offshoot of an ethnicity-based nation-building process, so is various contemporary praxis of combining misogyny with xenophobia. Right-wing nation-building ideologies target gendered immigrants and subject them to “cis-hetero hate speeches” (Richardson 573). Right-wing ideologies that promote heterosexuality and ethnic homogeneity target non-heterosexuals and foreigners. The practice is so contagious that native women, who were sympathetic to the immigrants, also become targets of such politicians. Critics like Monika Kopytowski, Farris, Sager, and Mulinary have drawn attention to this practice of combining xenophobia and misogyny. Right-wing politics capitalizes on the “mean world syndrome”, a cognitive bias that induces people to perceive the world to be far more menacing than it really is. Darkin’s case is a perfect example of “mean world syndrome” as he, indoctrinated with the manipulated, anti-immigrant newspaper reports of *The Record* erroneously considers the world as threatened

by the immigrants. Collective fear is strategically used to spread xenophobia, negating a democratic atmosphere.

Perfidious Albion showcases how de-Europeanisation aggravates backlash. The entire society is suffering from a male prejudice. The issue is addressed through Jess. In the meeting with Robert and De Coverley, Jess feels alienated, abandoned. The moments of the “tingling thrill of his canny collaborative attention” (11) are gone. Now she is one “being managed” (11). Jess cannot but feel that this is the age of “beatified masculine emotion. Everywhere you looked, men were sweeping up awards for feeling things” (11). It is a world where every woman is identified in relation to a male counterpart. The entire academic and intellectual world is gendered and information technology too is in a way contributing to women harassment.

The EU membership created provisions for various legislations promoting work-life balance. Introduction of maternity leave, provision for leave for parents and caregivers are some of these facilities to name. De-Europeanisation may result in suspension of these privileges. In the narrative, this is addressed through *The Green's* service staff, Kaisa's difficulty in maintaining work-life balance and the subsequent stress.

Perfidious Albion as a state-of-the-nation fiction addresses the issue regarding cyber sexism. The narrative portrays how Kaisa gets unsolicited “dick pics.” She is addressed as a ‘cunt’ who deserves to be ‘facefucked’ and this matches the Facebook comment that all women are cunts and they deserve to be facefucked. The digital media in the postmodernist tech era offer ample space for contentious debates. But this inclusive participatory forum is becoming notoriously hostile to women who dare to voice against-the-grain. There is a dearth of recognition of this crime within the legal system and disinclination to take punitive measures is widespread. For example, Sara Thornton, the ex-chief constable and Cressida Dick, the chief of the metropolitan police, criticised the proposals for making misogyny a hate crime and turned down the proposal of greater involvement of the police.

Further, a tendency to diminish the intensity and scale of harm encountered by women is conspicuous. *Perfidious Albion* addresses this issue through Jess. Jess enjoys the corporate job, appreciates intellectual freedom, but cannot tolerate the act of surveillance. Jess's research article on masculine identity in virtual gaming environment was appropriated by Ziegler who argued that the hyper-masculinized and essential misogyny of digital gaming space was conducive to a highly productive strain of male cooperation and as a result of it “a very specific strain of masculine bonding” (57) has flourished. Denouncing equality, Ziegler took solace that at least in some workplaces the concept of “less equality” is being adopted “in the name of greater productivity” (57). When Jess clarified her research findings in a sympathetic academic outlet and pointed out how Ziegler misinterpreted it, Ziegler just strategically excerpted two or three mildly contentious passages from Jess's article and posted it in his blog, shorn of context and padded with interjections. The response of Jess's partner is far from being sympathetic. Robert started to naturalise it “querying the reasons for its occurrence” (58) and tried to erase the gender point with the observation “everyone gets hate on the internet” (58). When ultimately Jess protested and gave evidence of how she has been threatened through mails, texted to her personal mobile number and described in graphic details all the things the anonymous sender intended to do, then only Robert became angry and apologetic and wrote a “defining piece” for the Command Line which garnered Jess swelling online support.

Thanks to female solidarity and the newly emerging mechanisms that have started to fight back against these cybersexisms. Such an organisation offered help, scrubbed Jess's account,

and rebuilt an untraceable life for her. A charity setup used to help women experiencing online harassment, stood by her. At the suggestion of Deepa, a worker of this organisation and also to ensure physical safety and cope up with ongoing insolvency, Jess joined *The Green* and left London. But leaving London spelled no respite for Jess. Though outwardly she was harassed no more, and apparently everything was at peace, in moments, a rage thrashed within her, torn scraps of discarded memory tortured her. Jess becomes a victim of late-night insomnia. As she would pour over Ziegler's latest article, track recent online misogynist harassment pieces, a dull, inexpressible, insomniac fury would grip her. It was in such moments, she created a blank Twitter account and addressed Ziegler as a cunt, partly to experience how one feels sending an offensive message. Ziegler however was far from reacting in the anticipated ways. He just blocked her. Jess was "struck by the power of the new media" (61).

Kopytowska's "media proximization approach" (2013, 2020) and Hutchby's "technological affordances" (2001) helps to clarify the issue. Digital media brings the like-minded internet users close and automatically they can subscribe to various discursive ideologies. People's axiological proximization creates "echo chambers" (Khosravini 64) that initiates a spiral of hate. Jess had been both attacked and now refused entry to a system that callously yielded aggression: "She was appalled to notice the apparatus of misogyny that supported Ziegler and in which opinion was the greenhouse for aggression, discussion the doorway to harassment" (61). She was forced to change her research topic, started working on fake CVs and falsified publication histories, and could craft a system that gave her access to the "repercussions of her rhetorical interventions across the web" (62). She could track and map all the shared messages. This empowered her and she learnt to change the apparatus of victimhood into that of empowerment. However, though this undertaking gave her the much-needed release and worked as a safety valve, it split her more and empowered her less— "no longer in command of her gathered selves" (64). Byers's narrative foregrounds how Trina was a victim of domestic violence and suffered brutally. After Trina retaliated against the misbehaviour of her boyfriend Dustin, he sued, falsely claiming nerve damage and post-traumatic stress disorder. Although she avoided jail, she was placed under strict curfew due to the biased legal system. This violence, initiated by her partner, took a heavy toll. *Perfidious Albion* highlights how Trina was stigmatized for her retaliation and how women become victims of domestic violence.

Conclusion

The neoliberal economy thrives on cheap labour and femonationalism creates opportunities for the exploitation of the poor migrants and racialized refugees who have no second choice. *The Green*, though claims a meritocratic work culture, is highly biased, in terms of both gender and race. Trina is cautioned for her violent history, and placed on indefinite probation, but *The Green* had to admit her talent and her expertise. Trina has been able to disrupt the unspoken stratification and set up a real sisterhood, bonhomie with Kaisa. With Trina's encouragement and under her tutelage, Kaisa starts to learn code and aspires to an upward mobilisation at *The Green*. Trina could detect a dwindling of her inner resources because of this extreme work pressure and later, as is revealed, because of the online 'dick' harassment. With the reduction of the spatio-temporal distance and the availability of the victim, the perpetrators of violence, in a sadistic and masochistic move, enjoy the spectatorship of suffering. Contemporary Britain is in the real sense of the term an albus, a white male land where "beatified masculine emotion" (11) is privileged over human values.

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