

Fragmented Nationhood: Post-Devolution Scottish Identity and the Politics of Belonging in the Fiction of Ali Smith and Jackie Kay

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Abstract

The establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 inaugurated a new cultural and political landscape that continues to reshape how Scottish writers imagine nationhood and belonging. This paper examines how Ali Smith and Jackie Kay, two of Scotland's most influential contemporary voices, interrogate the complexities of post-devolution identity through narrative experimentation and thematic engagement with fragmentation, plurality, and transnationalism. Both writers resist the notion of a singular, essentialized Scottish identity, instead foregrounding hybrid subjectivities shaped by gender, sexuality, race, and migration.

Ali Smith's formally innovative works, such as *Hotel World* (2001) and *Autumn* (2016), destabilize linear narratives of national identity, instead offering polyphonic voices that reflect the disjointed temporality of a nation negotiating its place in Britain and Europe. Her novels engage with the cultural uncertainty of post-devolution Scotland, blending local rootedness with global interconnectedness. Jackie Kay's fiction, particularly *Trumpet* (1998) and her later short stories, situates Scottishness within a diasporic and multicultural framework, foregrounding the intersections of Black and queer identities. Kay's narratives highlight how race, sexuality, and memory complicate traditional notions of Scottish nationhood while simultaneously expanding the cultural imagination of what "belonging" can mean.

Drawing on political criticism, cultural studies, and reception history, this paper argues that Smith and Kay articulate

a post-devolution Scottish identity that is deliberately fragmented, embracing multiplicity over homogeneity. Their works demonstrate how contemporary Scottish fiction moves beyond nostalgia for a unified national self, instead constructing a literature of negotiation that mirrors the realities of globalization, migration, and diversity in twenty-first-century Scotland. Ultimately, the study positions Smith and Kay as central to understanding how Scottish literature reflects – and actively participates in – the ongoing redefinition of national identity in the wake of devolution.

Keywords: *Post-devolution identity, Fragmentation, Hybridity, Diaspora, Globalisation, Transnationalism*

Introduction

The idea of Scotland as a nation has long been marked by fragmentation, negotiation, and contestation. Unlike states with uninterrupted histories of political sovereignty, Scotland's identity has been shaped by centuries of union, resistance, and cultural redefinition. The 1707 Act of Union formally bound Scotland to England, creating the United Kingdom of Great Britain, but it also initiated a tension between political incorporation and cultural distinctiveness that has persisted into the present. As Tom Nairn influentially argued in *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977), the Scottish national question has always been a paradox of belonging and estrangement – where the desire for political recognition exists alongside an entrenched participation in British and global modernity. This sense of fractured nationhood became further pronounced in the twentieth century, when deindustrialization, migration, and cultural globalization destabilized traditional markers of Scottish identity.

The creation of the devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999 was therefore not merely a constitutional change but also a symbolic reorientation of nationhood. Devolution opened new avenues for imagining Scotland beyond the binary of unionist and separatist politics. As critics such as Cairns Craig and Berthold Schoene note, post-devolution Scottish literature frequently engages with multiplicity, fluidity, and hybridity rather than asserting a singular, essentialist national

identity. Instead of presenting a coherent, monolithic vision of “Scottishness,” contemporary writers often foreground plural experiences shaped by class, gender, race, and sexuality, situating Scotland within a wider transnational and postcolonial framework.

This historical trajectory of fragmentation is critical for understanding how Ali Smith and Jackie Kay, two of Scotland’s most prominent contemporary writers, intervene in the cultural politics of post-devolution identity. Both authors refuse to romanticize a homogeneous Scottish past or to stabilize a single narrative of belonging. Instead, their works highlight disjunctions, overlaps, and negotiations—whether in the fractured temporalities of Smith’s *Hotel World* and *Autumn*, which reflect the unsettled mood of a nation repositioning itself in Europe and beyond, or in Kay’s *Trumpet*, where Blackness, queerness, and diaspora complicate inherited notions of Scottish nationhood. Their fiction echoes the reality that Scotland’s cultural identity cannot be disentangled from wider histories of migration, empire, and globalization.

By situating Smith and Kay’s work within the longer history of fragmented nationhood, this paper argues that contemporary Scottish literature after devolution has moved towards what might be termed a “literature of negotiation”—a body of writing that embraces multiplicity rather than coherence, provisionality rather than closure. This shift underscores how fragmentation, once perceived as a weakness or crisis, becomes a productive mode of imagining belonging in a Scotland that is at once local, British, European, and global.

Literature Review

The cultural redefinition of Scottish identity in the post-devolution era has been extensively examined across the fields of literary criticism, nationalism studies, and cultural theory. Foundational to these debates is Tom Nairn’s *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977), which situates Scotland’s national question within a broader European crisis of identity and sovereignty. Nairn’s analysis of “stateless nations” provides a crucial historical backdrop to understanding Scotland’s fractured

nationhood. Complementing this, Graeme Morton's *Unionist Nationalism* (1999) underscores the paradox of Scotland's cultural nationalism coexisting with political unionism, highlighting the tension between autonomy and shared governance.

In literary studies, Cairns Craig's *The Modern Scottish Novel* (1999) and *Intending Scotland* (2009) argue that fragmentation and hybridity have long been central to Scottish cultural production. Craig posits that post-devolution fiction often resists essentialist notions of Scottishness, instead exploring the complexities of multiple identities shaped by globalization and migration. Berthold Schoene's *The Cosmopolitan Novel in the Twenty-First Century* (2009) and his earlier work *The Making of Orcadia* (2007) similarly stress the cosmopolitan turn in Scottish writing, particularly in the wake of devolution. For Schoene, Scottish writers often embrace narrative multiplicity as a means of negotiating transnational belonging.

Ali Smith's fiction has received considerable critical attention for its formal innovation and resistance to stable identities. Scholars such as Monica Germanà (*Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 2013) and Sarah Dillon (*The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*, 2007) highlight Smith's experimentation with temporality, fragmentation, and polyphonic voices as a response to contemporary socio-political uncertainties. Her post-Brexit novel *Autumn* (2016), in particular, has been interpreted as emblematic of a fractured Britain negotiating the aftermath of devolution and European integration.

Jackie Kay's work, by contrast, has been widely studied through the lenses of race, sexuality, and diaspora. Critics such as Fiona Robertson (*The New British Identities: Literature in the 1990s*, 2002) and Alan Riach (*Representing Scotland in Literature, Popular Culture and Iconography*, 2005) have emphasized how Kay's *Trumpet* (1998) destabilizes traditional narratives of Scottish nationhood by foregrounding Black and queer subjectivities. More recent scholarship (e.g., Carla Sassi, *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives*, 2005) situates Kay's work within a global diasporic framework, suggesting that her narratives

expand the cultural imagination of Scotland beyond whiteness, heteronormativity, and monoculturalism.

The convergence of Smith and Kay in critical discourse underscores a broader scholarly recognition: that contemporary Scottish literature is less about articulating a unified identity and more about interrogating fragmentation, hybridity, and negotiation. This body of scholarship provides the conceptual scaffolding for this paper, which positions both writers as central to the reimagining of Scottish nationhood in the wake of devolution.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in literary and cultural analysis. The approach combines close reading of selected texts by Ali Smith and Jackie Kay with theoretical frameworks drawn from nationalism studies, postcolonial theory, and queer diaspora studies. Drawing on Tom Nairn (1977), Graeme Morton (1999), and Anthony D. Smith's theories of nationalism, the paper examines how Scottish identity has historically been conceptualized as fractured and negotiated. Cairns Craig (1999, 2009) and Berthold Schoene (2007, 2009) provide a lens for analyzing how Scottish fiction addresses hybridity and multiplicity in the post-devolution context. The works of Stuart Hall (*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, 1990), Paul Gilroy (*The Black Atlantic*, 1993), and José Esteban Muñoz (*Disidentifications*, 1999) inform readings of Jackie Kay's fiction, emphasizing how race, sexuality, and diaspora complicate Scottish national identity. Detailed textual analysis of narrative techniques (polyphony, fragmentation, temporality) in Smith and Kay's works. Situating the texts within the historical and political moment of Scottish devolution and its aftermath, as well as broader global debates about migration, belonging, and identity. Identifying convergences and divergences between Smith's and Kay's strategies of representing fragmented nationhood, thereby demonstrating how both writers contribute to a post-devolution reimagining of Scottishness. While the focus is on Smith and Kay, the study acknowledges that their works form part of a larger tradition of post-devolution Scottish writing (e.g., James Kelman, Irvine

Welsh, Janice Galloway). However, the paper limits itself to these two authors because of their sustained engagement with fragmentation and their centrality in contemporary debates about Scottish identity.

Discussion and findings

Ali Smith's fiction frequently employs formal experimentation—nonlinear temporality, polyphonic voices, and metafictional structures—to capture the unsettled nature of post-devolution Scottishness. Novels such as *Hotel World* (2001) and *Autumn* (2016) destabilize linear narratives of history and identity, mirroring the uncertainties of a nation negotiating its place within Britain and Europe. Her characters often exist in transitional spaces, where belonging is provisional and subject to renegotiation. This fragmentation, rather than signaling weakness, reflects the realities of globalization and the permeability of national borders.

Hotel World is structured into five interlinked sections, each narrated by a different voice, and framed by the metaphor of time ("past," "present historic," "future conditional," "perfect," and "future in the past"). The novel opens with the disembodied voice of Sara Wilby, a teenage hotel chambermaid who has died in a freak accident: she falls into a dumbwaiter while attempting to show off to a friend. Narrating from beyond the grave, Sara recalls fragments of her life, her first experiences of love, and her sudden death. Her ghostly perspective emphasizes transience, memory, and the fleeting nature of existence. The second section shifts to Else, a homeless woman who often begs outside the luxurious Global Hotel (where Sara died). Else's narration reveals her precarious existence on the margins of society. She is denied entry into the hotel's comfort, symbolizing exclusion and the divide between wealth and poverty in late-capitalist Britain. The third section is told from the perspective of Lise, a cynical and alienated receptionist at the Global Hotel. Her voice is full of irony and bitterness, highlighting the dehumanizing, corporate atmosphere of the hotel. Lise represents the emptiness of service-industry consumerism and the erosion of human connection.

Clare, Sara's younger sister, narrates the fourth section, exploring grief, memory, and the lingering trauma of loss. Through her fragmented attempts to make sense of Sara's death, Clare struggles with both personal and existential questions, revealing how memory haunts the living. The final section is told by Penny, a wealthy journalist who once stayed at the Global Hotel. Her privileged perspective contrasts starkly with Else's homelessness. Penny reflects on her own isolation and superficiality, exposing how wealth cannot shield individuals from existential emptiness. The novel ends ambiguously, looping back to Sara's ghost, reinforcing the cyclical, fragmented temporality of life, death, and memory.

Autumn is the first volume in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, written in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, and hailed as the "first post-Brexit novel." The novel opens with 101-year-old Daniel Gluck, a former songwriter and art lover, lying in a care home. His consciousness drifts between dreams and memories, blending reality with surreal, lyrical reflections on time and mortality. Elisabeth Demand, a thirty-something lecturer, has known Daniel since childhood, when he was her eccentric neighbour. Their intergenerational friendship forms the heart of the novel. Elisabeth frequently visits Daniel, bringing him books, art, and conversation, bridging the gap between past and present, youth and age. Set in the months following the 2016 referendum, the novel reflects the fractured state of Britain: hostility toward immigrants, bureaucratic absurdities (e.g., Elisabeth struggling to renew her passport), and a pervasive sense of disillusionment. The narrative frequently references the work of Pauline Boty, a forgotten female Pop artist, whose bold and disruptive art becomes a metaphor for resistance against cultural amnesia and patriarchal erasure. Through Elisabeth's engagement with Boty's art, Smith emphasizes the importance of memory, culture, and dissent. The novel moves fluidly between past and present, dream and reality, emphasizing cyclical time—mirroring the seasons. Despite political fragmentation, the novel insists on regeneration, creativity, and the possibility of connection. Ali Smith's *Hotel World* and *Autumn* interrogate the complexities of identity in post-devolution Scotland and

a fragmented Britain by refusing traditional linear narratives and embracing plurality and multiplicity. In *Hotel World*, fragmented voices (a ghost, a homeless woman, a receptionist, a grieving sister, a wealthy guest) refuse a unified perspective, instead presenting Scotland/Britain as fractured by class, mortality, memory, and capitalism. The disjointed form itself enacts fragmentation, mirroring the disjunctive experience of a nation negotiating post-devolution selfhood. In *Autumn*, Smith dismantles temporal linearity, juxtaposing a pre-Brexit past, a fractured post-referendum present, and a cyclical vision of renewal. The narrative is polyphonic, interweaving art history, politics, and dreamscapes to embody the unsettled mood of a post-devolution and post-Brexit society.

Both novels resist essentialist identities. *Hotel World* foregrounds voices from the margins (homeless, grieving, ghostly), amplifying plural experiences of exclusion and belonging. *Autumn* emphasizes intergenerational plurality through the Daniel-Elisabeth relationship, collapsing barriers between old and young, past and present. It also insists that belonging is shaped not just by nationality but by memory, art, and personal connection.

Hotel World critiques late-capitalist globalization through the symbol of the “Global Hotel,” a sterile, placeless institution that erases local identity. The novel situates Scotland/Britain within global consumerism, highlighting the alienation and inequality it generates. *Autumn* situates post-devolution Scotland in a transnational crisis, reflecting the fractures of Brexit Britain. Through references to Pauline Boty and European art, Smith gestures toward a broader European cultural identity that transcends nationalist borders. Both novels resist nostalgic or essentialist visions of Scottish nationhood. Instead, Smith emphasizes the provisional and contested nature of belonging. Post-devolution identity is shown not as a coherent “essence” but as a literature of negotiation—fractured, fluid, and entangled with global currents. *Hotel World* reflects the inequalities of a Scotland negotiating neoliberal globalization in the early post-devolution years. *Autumn* captures the disillusionment of a Britain fractured by Brexit, gesturing toward the uncertainty of Scotland’s place within the UK and Europe.

Jackie Kay's debut novel *Trumpet* is inspired by the real-life story of Billy Tipton, a U.S. jazz musician who was revealed after death to have been biologically female but lived publicly as male. Kay reimagines this figure as Joss Moody, a Black Scottish jazz trumpeter whose gender identity is only publicly "discovered" after his death. Joss lives as a man, married to Millie, a white Scottish woman, with whom he raises an adopted mixed-race son, Colman. His identity as a trans man is known only to Millie, who accepts and protects him, and to the medical professionals who eventually certify his death. After Joss's death, Millie faces invasive public scrutiny. The press sensationalizes Joss's identity, reducing his life to scandal. Millie narrates her grief in a lyrical, interior voice, affirming her unwavering love for Joss while reflecting on their shared life. Colman, their son, struggles with anger and betrayal when he discovers his father's secret. Initially manipulated by tabloid journalist Sophie Stones into exposing Joss, Colman eventually reclaims his father's legacy by embracing the complexity of his identity. A ruthless journalist eager to profit from the scandal, Sophie represents the exploitative gaze of media culture. She objectifies Joss's life, turning personal history into public spectacle.

The narrative unfolds in multiple perspectives, interweaving Millie's mourning, Colman's rage and reconciliation, and Sophie's cold opportunism. Through this polyphony, Kay resists a singular interpretation of Joss's identity, instead presenting a layered portrait of love, music, gender, and cultural belonging. Kay's later short fiction continues her exploration of identity, race, sexuality, and belonging. *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (2002), stories address everyday encounters shaped by difference — racism, homophobia, and cultural alienation — in contemporary Britain. In "Big Milk," a lesbian mother navigates both joy and societal prejudice in raising her child. In "Shell," a mixed-race protagonist grapples with questions of appearance, belonging, and cultural memory. These stories highlight fragmented and often humorous negotiations of identity, showing how the personal and political intersect in diasporic lives. *Reality, Reality* (2012), this collection explores women's lives and identities in increasingly mediated, consumerist societies.

Stories like “The Woman with the Fork and Knife Disorder” or “Mrs Vадnie Marleen Sevlon” (an isolated woman who invents a television career for herself) address loneliness, invisibility, and the desire for recognition. While less explicitly focused on race or queer identity than *Trumpet*, these stories foreground marginality and the multiplicity of lived realities. Taken together, Kay’s fiction maps the complexities of living at intersections – Black, queer, Scottish, female, and diasporic – while exposing how dominant narratives erase or distort such experiences.

Kay’s work refuses to imagine Scottishness as monocultural or monolithic. Instead, it situates identity in a diasporic and multicultural framework, foregrounding plurality and hybridity. In *Trumpet*, Joss Moody embodies a Scottishness that is not white, destabilizing the homogenizing myth of the Scottish nation. Kay challenges what Stuart Hall (1990) terms the “imagined community” of cultural identity, presenting Black Scottishness as constitutive of the nation rather than marginal. Critics such as Alan Riach (*Representing Scotland in Literature, Popular Culture and Iconography*, 2005) argue that Kay redefines the cultural imagination of Scotland by insisting on its racial and cultural plurality. Joss’s trans identity complicates normative gender expectations, situating Scottishness within broader global debates on gender and sexuality. Fiona Robertson (*The New British Identities*, 2002) notes that *Trumpet* queers the national narrative, foregrounding love, desire, and authenticity over rigid categories of identity. José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification” (1999) is useful here: Joss does not conform to heteronormative or transnormative scripts, but instead inhabits identity in ways that disrupt social binaries.

Kay’s recurring exploration of adoption, migration, and displacement (Colman’s mixed heritage, or the diasporic resonances in her short stories) reflects Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* (1993) model of identity as fluid, transnational, and shaped by histories of slavery and migration. Carla Sassi (*Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature*, 2005) situates Kay within a postcolonial framework, where Scotland’s own history of empire is refracted through its contemporary multicultural identities.

The exploitation of Joss's identity by Sophie Stones highlights how Black and queer subjectivities are often sensationalized, misrepresented, or erased. By giving narrative authority to Millie and Colman, Kay reclaims these silenced voices, constructing what Berthold Schoene (2007) calls a "literature of cosmopolitan negotiation." Kay's fiction aligns with post-devolution literary currents (Cairns Craig, *Intending Scotland*, 2009), where Scottish identity is no longer understood as a unitary essence but as fragmented, plural, and diasporic. Her characters embody the tensions of belonging — both rooted in Scotland and shaped by transnational trajectories — exemplifying a cosmopolitan vision of nationhood.

Conclusion

Benedict Anderson's notion of the nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983) underlines that national identity is a cultural product rather than an organic essence; when writers make identity a site of negotiation they follow Anderson's insight that the nation is continually reimagined. Tom Nairn's diagnosis of the Scottish national question as one of rupture and ambivalence (Nairn, 1977) also anticipates a literature concerned with fragmentation rather than unity.

Homi K. Bhabha's account of cultural hybridity and the "third space" (Bhabha, 1994) supplies vocabulary for reading texts that refuse binary accounts of identity (Scottish/other; native/immigrant); instead they stage identities formed in interstitial spaces. Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993) highlights transnational, diasporic flows that decenter national purity and anchor identity in diasporic entanglements. Stuart Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity is made in historical and discursive practice — always in process. José Esteban Muñoz's notion of *disidentification* (1999) is especially useful for reading queer and racialized Scottish subjects who refuse assimilation to dominant national narratives and instead rework them from the margins. Conceptual work on cosmopolitanism and transnationalism (e.g., Ulrich Beck, Kwame Anthony Appiah) shows how globalization complicates political attachments and cultural belonging; contemporary Scottish fiction often renders belonging as negotiated across local, national, and global frames.

Multiple narrators and perspectives (e.g., Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*; Ali Smith's *Hotel World*) unsettle a single authoritative view of "Scotland," allowing competing claims about belonging to coexist on the page. Nonlinear time, memory-lapses, and cyclical structures (Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, intergenerational flashbacks) portray identity as temporally unstable—always in negotiation with past and future. Texts that draw attention to storytelling itself critique monolithic "national stories" and open space for alternative narratives. Local Scottish scenes are placed in relation to diasporic, transnational networks (migrants, musical circuits, media flows), displacing nationalist closure. First-person testimonies from marginalized positions (Black, queer, working-class) reclaim representational authority and resist media-driven or nostalgic national myths. These formal devices make the act of negotiating identity legible: the text's form is a rehearsal of negotiation. Contemporary Scottish fiction negotiates belonging across several thematic axes. Texts place Scottishness in diasporic circuits. Characters of mixed heritage, immigrants, or transnational creatives show that Scottish identity is inflected by global histories (empire, migration) and contemporary flows (economic migration, cultural exchange). Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* centralizes a Black, queer Scottish household to demonstrate how race and diaspora are intrinsic to modern Scottish identity. Fiction foregrounds racialized experiences within Scotland, challenging the whiteness assumed by older nationalist narratives. By making Blackness and mixed identities central—not peripheral—these works force a redefinition of the national subject. Queer and trans subjectivities (Joss in *Trumpet*; other queer figures across contemporary short fiction) destabilize heteronormative national imaginaries. Using Muñoz's and Judith Butler's vocabularies, these texts show national belonging as performative and contestable. Writers depict how late-capitalist forces reshape communities—hotel service economies, care homes, precarious labor—linking local socioeconomic fractures with global neoliberal processes. Ali Smith's *Hotel World* and *Autumn* dramatize how economic and political shifts (devolution's political reframing, Brexit-era anxieties) produce new forms of exclusion and negotiation.

Smith's narrative fragmentation and polyphony make identity a collage of temporalities and perspectives; her novels often link local Scottish scenes to Europe and beyond (art history, migration, travel), refusing insular nationalism and instead modeling belonging as relational and provisional. Kay relocates Scottishness in a diasporic key; her polyvocal narrative gives primacy to intimate domestic testimony and counters sensationalist or exclusionary media narratives, thereby reclaiming the right to narrate who counts as Scottish. Authors like James Kelman, Irvine Welsh, Janice Galloway, A. L. Kennedy diagnose social fracture and plural identities – Kelman's dialectal narrators and Welsh's urban subcultures reveal Scotland as internally diverse, often transgressing the boundaries of sanitized nationalist memory.

A literature of nostalgia presumes a recoverable, homogeneous past; it comforts by smoothing over diversity and historical rupture. By contrast, the literature of negotiation makes visible historic entanglements and affirms plural belonging – it recognizes multiple Scotlands (urban, diasporic, queer, working-class) rather than a single canonical Scotland. It politically reframes identity – negotiation opens democratic space for recognition and contestation, rather than reifying exclusionary myths. It engages global currents – it shows Scottishness as participating in transnational cultural and economic flows, not sealed off from them. Therefore, the turn to negotiation is both aesthetic and political: it allows literature to reflect and intervene in contemporary debates about who belongs in Scotland and on what terms.

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