

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Brexit and its Aftermath According to Daphne du Maurier's Novel *Rule Britannia*

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ABSTRACT

Daphne du Maurier's *Rule Britannia* (1972) envisions a future Britain that, after withdrawing from the European Community, faces economic and political turmoil, and then establishes a new union with the United States called USUK. Concerns regarding identity, independence, and the ongoing conflict between various aspects of British consciousness had therefore been present long before the emergence of the Brexit referendum in 2016. The novel *Rule Britannia* explores the tensions between internal and external influences and the fear of Britain's uncertain place in the world, causing people to feel a deep loss of identity and a resistance to what is to come, similar to emotional conflicts that would materialize decades later. This study aims, through a detailed examination of the novel, to demonstrate how fiction can reflect existing conflicts. Although the novel depicts an exaggerated dystopian view, many of its essential ideas resonate with Brexit's aftermath, providing insight into potential future developments by uncovering hidden fears and tensions within British society.

Keywords: Brexit, United Kingdom, Daphne du Maurier, Community, European Union.

مقالة بحثية

بريكست وعواقبه وفقاً لرواية "لتحكمي يا بريطانيا" لدافني دو موريه

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الملخص

تتخيّل دافني دو موريه في روايتها "لتحكمي يا بريطانيا" (عام 1972) بريطانيا مستقبلاً وهي تنسحب من المجموعة الأوروبية لتواجه اضطرابات اقتصادية وسياسية كبيرة، ثم تؤسس اتحاداً جديداً مع الولايات المتحدة يُعرف باسم USUK. لقد كانت الهواجس المرتبطة بالهوية والاستقلال والصراع المستمر بين جوانب متعددة من الوعي البريطاني حاضرة منذ زمن طويل، أي قبل ظهور استفتاء انسحاب المملكة المتحدة من الاتحاد الأوروبي (بريكست) عام 2016 بوقت كبير. تستكشف الرواية التوترات بين التأثيرات الداخلية والخارجية والخوف من مكانة بريطانيا غير المستقرة في العالم، مما دفع الناس إلى الشعور بفقدان عميق لهويتهم ومقاومة لما هو قادم، وهي مشاهجه لصراعات عاطفية ظهرت بعد عقود من الزمن. يهدف هذا البحث من خلال دراسة متعمقة للرواية إلى توضيح كيف يمكن للأدب أن يعكس النزاعات القائمة. على الرغم من أن الرواية تعرض رؤية ديستوبية مبالغاً فيها إلا أن الكثير من أفكارها الجوهرية تتشابه مع ما حدث بعد بريكست، كما أنها تقدّم فهماً للتطورات المستقبلية المحتملة من خلال كشف المخاوف والقلق الكامن داخل المجتمع البريطاني.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بريكست، المملكة المتحدة، دافني دو موريه، المجتمع، الاتحاد الأوروبي.

1. Introduction

On June 23, 2016, voters in the United Kingdom were asked one question: "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?" A tremendous number of people came to vote, 72,2 percent, ending with the majority choosing withdrawal from the EU. This, however, was not the first referendum in which the people had to give their views on the United Kingdom and its relationship with Europe. In the year 1975 they were also asked to vote for or against staying in the European Community. The majority chose to stay because of the deteriorating UK economy and their strong trust in the main political parties that advised to make this choice. ([2], p. 1)

Over the past decade, Europe has faced many difficulties that have put the European Union institutions in unexpected situations. The first was the financial crisis that occurred in 2007-2008. This was followed by the recent refugee crisis that had to look into its limitations in certain frameworks, concerning, for instance, the monetary economics and external affairs. Moreover, it became clear that Europe in its entirety was suffering from economic and social weaknesses in a globalized world. Thus, its economic growth and social development came at risk. These conflicts and insufficiencies have been among the main reasons for the Brexit decision. ([1], p. 1-2)

The 2016 referendum became the second event feared to cause destabilization of both the European Union and the UK itself. This would have been partly due to economic consequences, but even more so if it could lead to a new referendum on Scotland's independence, which had also occurred in 2014 and resulted in a majority opposing it. Moreover, Brexit could also result into security and political concerns when it comes to the border between Northern Ireland, which is part of the UK, and the Republic of Ireland, which will remain a member of the EU. Even though the majority of Northern Ireland has voted against the withdrawal, a big political difference and tension may arise amongst the different factions. Since the second most significant partner of Northern Ireland is the UK, a disruption of free movement and trade could present serious problems. Also, Brexit

may trigger a domino effect of future exits, further destabilizing the EU. ([14], p. 232-33)

When it comes to the stance of the US, in the 1950's and the 1960's, it supported the integration of the EU mainly so that it would be a strong defence against the Soviet Union. Moreover, the EU would enhance economic development, and that would then present great investment opportunities for the US as well. This US support for this integration continued for the most part throughout the years. However, a clear shift in views appeared, close to the presidency of Trump. The American author and television producer Ted Malloch stated on February 14, 2017: "Brexit gives the US an opportunity for pause and an appreciation that the EU is actually weak and getting weaker. It could under certain scenarios even come apart...In Trump's world, the future is not what it was." ([15], p. 189, 192) It is right from the beginning of Trump's presidency that the US and UK strengthened their relationship. As the UK might face great difficulties after Brexit, perhaps its relations with EU countries would weaken, which means that "the UK would have to reinforce its political, diplomatic and military links with the US." Trump has shown his support for Brexit from the start and has continued doing so. ([14], p. 186)

The UK, however, with fair negotiations and a good deal, will continue to play a significant role in Europe. Moreover, "with existing countries inside or outside the EU, Britain can be part of a thriving and mutually beneficial broader European partnership." ([10], p. 258) All in all, the possible consequences of Brexit have so far raised more questions than answers. The endless meetings and discussions amongst UK leaders along with the delegates of the EU have made clear that "the nature of Brexit ('hard' or 'soft') is for now imprecise and that the process will be long and difficult." ([1], p. 2)

2 The Novel and its Writer:

Daphne du Maurier (1907-1989) is mostly known for her novel *Rebecca* (1938) and her short story "The Birds" (from the collection *The Apple Tree* 1952) which were both adapted into famous movies. ([7], p. 224) Most of her books concern a male character who is mad or on the verge of madness, which is the narrative voice in her work. These outspoken

characters are each related to the killing of a woman, whereby du Maurier's focus is not on romance and sacrifice, but on possession, obsession and death. ([7], p. 221-222)

Rule Britannia is Daphne du Maurier's last novel, published in 1972. This novel differed much from her previous ones, in that she originally wrote it as "a fast and funny piece of satire", perhaps even controversial in that it might be seen as offensive towards America. She was still proud of the quick work she pulled off and did not realize, however, that this novel would not be nearly as successful as her previous ones. In fact, it was criticized quite negatively that "at best, this new novel was pedestrian and at worst, it was plain silly." Yet, because of her ingenious image as a writer, she remained "still the star." ([4], p. 382)

The novel focuses on the United Kingdom after it left Europe and became an individual country. Many unforeseen problems occurred, including a high rate of unemployment, and in order to get back stronger, it unites with America. This story starts with the coming of the Americans soldiers, followed by the resistance against the invading enemy that attempt to change whatever Britain once used to be. The main characters are an old grandmother called mainly Mad (abbreviation for Madam), along with her six adopted sons, and her granddaughter Emma. Although du Maurier had no specific political allegiance, she was against tyranny and portrayed strong women who played a central role in the resistance. ([7], p. 224) In a letter of hers, however, dated August 1973, du Maurier replied to French publishers with regards to her translator Maurice-Bernard Endrèbe, stating that "[i]n England and in the United States, no one seems to have understood that my novel *Rule Britannia* is FOR Great Britain's entry into Europe." ([12], p. 288)

Despite misunderstandings and the critique and disappointment of many of her readers, this novel allowed her to express personal opinions more than any of her previous works did. ([12], p. 286) With a long writing-career that spanned from 1931 until 1989, she remains known as a skillful writer, having experimented in various genres, including the family saga, gothic fiction, biography, as well as short

stories. Critical interpretation may at times have disabled her from writing for a period of time, but it never stopped her. In the end, her novels "have been read by millions of people in scores of languages." ([6], p. 1)

3. An Analysis

3.1 Referendum

The novel *Rule Britannia* concerns the invasion of American troops onto British soil, followed by the rising tensions and rebellious actions between the newcomers and the main characters. The latter of which are Mad, an elderly former actress, along with her six adopted boys, and with the help of some of their neighbors. ([9], p. 246) As the actual scenario of Britain leaving the European Community occurs before the novel begins, the reader finds himself amid the many events that result from it. Although the people themselves had chosen this through a referendum, they were unaware of the problems that would occur, including unemployment, and from there, the situation only worsened for most of them. ([8], p. 182)

Men, women, boys, girls, jostling for position, scrambling to obtain the few jobs worth the holding, and ever since the government had backtracked and pulled out of Europe- dissension amongst the Ten was the official reason, and a national referendum had given the government of the day a thumping majority – things seemed to have gone from bad to worse. ([3], p. 13)

In contrast to expectations, the 2016 referendum in Britain resulted in 52% of voters supporting Brexit, while 48% opposed it. Many individuals later expressed regret for not voting or for making their choices without adequate information. A sense of concern has emerged among the younger generation about losing access to free state education and the opportunities to travel and work in Europe. They feel disappointed by the decision made by the older generation. ([13], p. 142)

3.2 Saving the Economic Crisis

A similar fear is described in the novel, in which Britain decides to take drastic measures to save the country. In the wake of the economic collapse, it has decided to merge with the United States, forming a

new nation called USUK. Their new flag would consist of the Stars and Stripes combined with the Union Jack. ([8], p. 182) This occurs rather early on in the story: “The television set was turned on. It showed a picture hitherto unseen, of two national flags side by side, joined together at the base. They were the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes.” ([3], p. 28)

Emma’s father comments on the events occurring in the country, proudly believing that what is about to come, can only be positive. Nothing could be worse than how Great Britain used to be when it was still part of the European Coalition. All that is desperately needed is to unite with the United States.

The entry into Europe was a flop, a disaster, prices rose nearly fifty percent, do you remember? We had a political storm and near revolution. So, what happened? A general election with the country hopelessly divided, then a referendum, and finally the Coalition Government we have today, which has seized on the idea of USUK as a drowning man clutch at a straw. ([3], p. 150)

A state of emergency arises as the union is announced, shocking the people who witness a staggering increase in American militants. British citizens do not know what is happening or what to expect. ([5], p. 68) Admiral Jollif is the one who first announces the changed situation in Britain right after the arrival of the American troops.

I do, however, want to impress upon you all that there is no cause for alarm. I repeat that, no cause for alarm. The aircraft you have seen and heard passing overhead this morning are friendly to us. The American Sixth Fleet is in the English Channel. The troops you may have observed in the town and ports belong to the combined armed forces of the United States, and are here in the United Kingdom with our full knowledge and cooperation. ([3], p. 29)

The Prime Minister later explains how the situation developed: “We had no alternative, and we ask for no alternative; for the union that has been offered to us, and that we have gladly and gratefully accepted, is one which will bring new strength, new determination and new hope for the future, not only for our two peoples but for the whole of the free

world.” ([3], p. 41) Additionally, he provides a thorough explanation for the measures taken. Britain faced significant challenges when leaving Europe, encountering problems that were unexpected and for which no solutions had been planned. Thus, the US-UK union appeared to be their only viable option.

The breakdown of our partnership within the European community and our withdrawal from it, due to no failure on our part, brought great economic difficulties, as I feared would be the case and as I warned you at the time, and our political autonomy and military supremacy were also endangered. Now, thanks to our old allies and new partners, we are threatened no longer. The great combination of the United States and the United Kingdom, to be known henceforth as USUK, need fear no one. What we have to give is theirs, what they have to give is ours... ([3], p. 41)

3.3 Foreign Invasion

Although the government in the novel presented the union as the ultimate solution to all the current problems, the British people greatly doubted whether that would indeed be the case. “Unemployment was still acute, prices were rising all the time, but this seemed to have become a way of life. Did union with the U.S. mean that everything would change and everyone be happy?” ([3], p. 44) It is these questions that occupied the mind of young twenty-year-old Emma, just as her grandmother Mad along with many other people questioned. Having in a way accepted the negative consequences of Britain leaving the European Community, would they now be able to accept a foreign invasion that promised them a prosperous future?

The British people, however, cannot simply surrender to the increasing American military presence as if their own land has been taken away. Moreover, their own culture and traditions are not respected and they feel greatly humiliated when the American holiday Thanksgiving Day is forced upon the British people. Even their own flag is without the people’s consent replaced by the USUK-flag, while the children are obliged to learn the American anthem ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’. It seems that the longer the American presence in Great Britain, the more the

latter takes up a subordinate role. ([5], p. 68) This has been stated by Mad, speaking to her children and granddaughter: “Haven’t you noticed,” said Mad, “that with every news bulletin about USUK there’s more emphasis on the U.S. and less on the U.K.?” ([3], p. 248) From this American takeover and the sudden cultural change, sprang forth a strong resistance. It started as a small movement that soon spread more widely into a popular uprising. ([5], p. 68)

Yet the movement did not suddenly arise. It started when Andy, Mad’s adopted twelve-year old son, accidentally kills an American marine and with this, the situation turned even more against them. While the Americans could not find out who killed him, or whether he was killed at all, they did take drastic measures punishing everyone in the area to affirm their own powers against the British people. Immediately after the incident, they were cut off from the outside world, with no transport, no working radio, and no water. Moreover, they were not allowed to leave the area without a specific badge, and soon all men were arrested and taken to an unknown place. Although the purpose of such measures was to weaken the people, they had the opposite effect as it causes the growth of hatred and resistance within the people. Soon, even Dr. Summers, who used to only involve himself with his patients, could not remain silent anymore.

You can’t cut off people’s water and stop them driving cars because some American marine has fallen off a cliff. Union is one thing, but military tactics to put the wind up the local population are another. So, he too had got himself involved. The snowball gathered pace. Them and us. ([3], p. 219)

3.4 Civil Disobedience

The snowball effect started to form. They believed that the best course of action was civil disobedience. There would be no need for outside travel and trade if community living was encouraged and neighbors were relied upon. The Americans would soon find it more and more difficult to maintain their presence if they only traded among themselves for necessities like wood and milk, since no one would be left to buy anything from them. Their protest started with

something as simple as selling milk to only those who are against the Americans: “Only those households who agree to protest against the restrictions will be able to buy milk.” ([3], p. 202)

Although there were not many in the area, it soon affected the surrounding regions as well. Dr. Summers agreed that despite their small number, they were able to fight the American Marines in their own way, influencing other people indirectly: “I know we weren’t many as numbers go, but it started the ball rolling. And if you want proof of it, there go some of the stragglers, out of Cornwall into Devon, and by now I’m pretty certain they’ll get the same treatment there.” ([3], p. 274)

In spite of their initial goodwill, as stated by the British government, a union would hardly ever turn into a positive outcome. At some point, there would be tension amongst the two countries, cultural misunderstandings, a rising competition, or even a certain animosity between them. Daphne du Maurier stated, through Emma’s perspectives, as to the resulting problems within such union: “The point was, even when two people loved each other, even when marriages were happy, when parents loved children and children loved parents, there was this separation, this division, there could never be complete union. That was why the USUK thing would never work.” ([3], p. 140) In the end, independence was seen as the better option than the union with the United States, yet as to the writer’s views, it would have been even better had it stayed within Europe.

Conclusion

Even though it wasn’t well received in her day, Rule Britannia is still relevant today. This novel appears to have predicted Brexit as the United Kingdom left the European Community. Daphne du Maurier, through this novel, showed that the country weakened without the assistance of Europe. The situation in Britain would turn into chaos, many would lose their jobs, and there would be fewer opportunities for the younger people to rise in society, thereby affecting the educational system.

In reality, however, Brexit did have negative impact on the UK trade but it is less severe than economists

predicted. The long-term effect of Brexit is developing to this day as the economy is still adjusting to the new regulations, and not all trade barriers have yet to take place. Although new trade deals could be made with third countries, none could actually take the place of the restricted access to EU's single market. Many small firms have reduced or stopped trading with the EU, and with time, the price of trade between the UK and the EU may increase further. ([11], p. 2)

Ultimately, the true consequences of Brexit will only become apparent in the coming years. Whether the UK would unite in a similar way with the United States, or with any other country, is perhaps unlikely, but the novel does let the reader contemplate on what could have happened after its withdrawal.

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