EUROPE B COMPLEX AND BREXIT – LITERARY DEPICTION BY AGNIESZKA DALE

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Abstract: *The category of* Europe B*, popularised in media and political discourse after the fall of the Iron Curtain, has long carried connotations of second-class Europeanness. As Larry Wolff argues, Eastern Europe was "invented" as a discursive category during the Enlightenment, functioning as a foil to the supposed rational modernity of the West (Wolff 11). Maria Todorova's influential Imagining the Balkans similarly underscores how the East was repeatedly constructed as backward, and insufficiently "European" (Todorova 18). In the context of Brexit Britain, these previous symbolic hierarchies were revived in colloquial discourse, where Polish and other Central and Eastern European migrants were often reminded of their conditional belonging. This essay explores how literature can respond to such linguistic and cultural changes, focusing on Agnieszka Dale's* Fox Season and Other Short Stories *(2017) in relation to the discursive strategies analysed in* Victims and Villains: Migrant Voices in the British Media *(2016). In taking this approach, the paper foregrounds literature's capacity to humanise the migrant condition, to transform slogans and categories into narratives of complexity, irony, and reflection. Where media discourse seeks closure — presenting the stereotyped picture of the migrant as victim or villain — fiction points out ambiguity, evokes the multiplicity of voices and experiences. Consequently, it provides not only a vivid testimony of exclusion but also encourages the reader to rethink the multifaceted nature of the situation.*

Keywords: *Agnieszka Dale; Europe B; migrant condition*.

Reconsidering Europe B

The expression *Europe B* emerged in media and political discourse after the fall of the Iron Curtain to designate those nations that were considered peripheral to the Europe of the West. Its usage carried negative connotations of second-class citizenship: to be from *Europe B* was to be European but not quite fully so. This discursive hierarchy has deep roots in the intellectual and cultural history of Europe. As Larry Wolff argues in *Inventing Eastern Europe*, the very notion of Eastern Europe was a creation of Enlightenment thought, a way for Western philosophers and travellers to imagine a semi-civilised frontier against which the rational modernity of the West could be defined. "Eastern Europe," Wolff writes, "was discovered as Europe's complementary other half: backward and barbaric, yet also available for reform and improvement" (Wolff 11). This invention shaped centuries of representation, from travelogues to diplomatic reports, where the lands east of Vienna were imagined as incomplete, liminal, or not quite European.

Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* extends this insight by analysing how the Balkans, in particular, became a symbolic space within the European imagination. For Todorova, the Balkans were not constructed as entirely outside Europe, like the Orient in Edward Said's analysis, but as ambiguously inside and outside at once: "not fully fledged members of the European family, yet not fully alien either" (Todorova 18). This ambivalence — being neither wholly foreign nor fully accepted — captures the essence of the *Europe B* condition. Central and Eastern Europe occupies a space that is European in geography and culture yet persistently coded as other. These discursive constructions shaped not only diplomatic and cultural relations, but also colloquial forms of classification, deeply rooted in people's mentality. The *Europe B* migrant in Britain carries the weight of history: her presence is haunted by centuries of categorisation as worse, marginal, not equal.

The textual landscape in which such aspects are discussed has long been mapped under the name of *Europe B*. The expression carries the sense of an "other Europe," the lesser half of a divided continent, burdened with the legacy of communism, authoritarianism, and economic backwardness. Milan Kundera, in *A Kidnapped West: The Tragedy of Central Europe*, argued that the cultural space of Central Europe was in fact Western in heritage but had been violently annexed to the East by political circumstances (Kundera 1984), while also echoing Czesław Miłosz's reflections on East–West identity in *Native Realm* and Václav Havel's essays in *The Power of the Powerless* on life caught between competing universalisms that never fully admitted Eastern voices (Miłosz; Havel). The sense of cultural dislocation resonates through his mourning. The changes after 1989 profoundly marked the identity formation of many Central and Eastern Europeans and, both politically and mentally, paved way to the EU. The 2004 enlargement of the European Union, which brought seven countries from the Eastern Block, including Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, into the EU, was often framed in British media as the arrival of *Europe B*. Similar comments followed after the 2007 accession of Romania and Bulgaria. While Western Europeans fully enjoyed their right to free movement without controversy, Eastern Europeans were immediately subjected to suspicion. Migrants were frequently portrayed in the media as cheap labour, culturally different, and thus constructed as a serious threat to wages a burden on welfare systems, or even sensationalized as "savages" eating swans (Davidson; *The Telegraph*; *Evening Standard*). Islentyeva observes that press narratives surrounding Brexit repeatedly relied on such stereotypes, portraying these groups as only partially European (Islentyeva 2023). Other studies likewise highlight how the East was described in stagnant or regressive terms (Azarova 2017; Rozenfeld 2016). Together, these representations reinforced symbolic divisions within Europe, positioning Central and Eastern Europeans as belonging to a marginal

position within Europeanness (Radziwinowiczówna 2021). As may be argued, the old Enlightenment hierarchy reappeared in new administrative forms and media pictures: migrants from these countries were legally European but symbolically other.

This way the label of *Europe B* outlived the Cold War, re-emerging in the early 2000s as the European Union enlarged to include Poland and other post-communist states. These newcomers, mostly young, when given European citizenship, often migrated to Western Europe, wanting to taste the change. In the post-1989 imaginary, access to the EU's four freedoms came to signify more than market integration; it embodied the hope of transcending both economic and cultural marginality and so asserting a European identity.

In pre-Brexit reality this division was again strongly emphasised. The referendum campaign of 2016 was saturated with images of migrant "invasion" of an EU that allowed too many foreigners into the country (Grinan-Moutinho), of Polish workers portrayed as a flood or swarm. As Ali Smith illustrates this approach in her novel *Autumn* (2016), the anti-immigration movement went beyond the media; its influence was visible in everyday life, on the streets of many towns and cities." Graffiti appeared on walls across Britain declaring "Go home" (Smith 53) and marches were organized where crowds shouted slogans such as: "This is not Europe" (Smith 130, Kermeliotis). These utterances did not merely describe hostility; they performed it. They turned public space into a site of exclusion.

Agnieszka Dale and the Migrant Voice

"Do you not like me here?" asks the narrator of Agnieszka Dale's short story *What We Should Feel Now* (Dale 75). The question, posed in a moment of discomfort encapsulates the migrant condition in contemporary Britain: a constant negotiation between belonging and non-belonging, and suspicion. Dale's words echo the raising questions about who is permitted to inhabit public space, who is recognised as a rightful national of the United Kingdom and who is reminded — sometimes politely, sometimes violently — to "go home".

Agnieszka Dale (née Surażyńska) is a Polish-born, London-based writer who has lived in the UK for over two decades (Bryla 175–76; *Wikipedia*). Her collection *Fox Season and Other Short Stories* (2017) effectively captures the emotional impact of political changes and the tension caused by the pre-Brexit campaign. The book was issued by Jantar Publishing, run by an independent editor, Michael Tate, who himself studied Czech literature in Prague and graduated from University College London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies. What should be noted, the stories were originally written in English, not translated form Polish.

Critical reception of the book was favorable, a response reflected in the reviews cited on the back cover:

> [...] Dale writes about being Polish; being outside Poland; being a woman; being visible and invisible; from the East; from the West; from somewhere central. Dale's world is an intimate kingdom. It's a happy nation with no distinct nationality, a place where people still try, believe, or just *are*.
>
> Dale is between cultures, rooted in one, integrated into another, perfectly placed as observer and participant. She writes with an entrancing blend of distance and intimacy. In this country, she is an immigrant, but one who knows us and our language too well for comfort. Reading her, it feels that someone who has learned to be one of us, now does it better than we do. She knows what makes us laugh, and what makes us laughable.
> — Jeremy Hardy, comedian

Agnieszka Dale's book *Fox Season and Other Short Stories* stages the lives of Polish migrants in Britain, positioned as "White Others" (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 682). Her fiction exemplifies what Martyna Bryla describes as "insight into the dynamics of (non)belonging in the specific Polish-British context as seen from a female migrant perspective, while at the same time reaching beyond national dichotomies" (Bryla 163). Dale's stories oscillate between allegory and realism, showing how exclusion is experienced both symbolically and bureaucratically.

In a short story entitled *Fox Season,* the figure of the urban fox becomes an allegory for a migrant, "the other" within set social frames: tolerated yet mistrusted, familiar yet cast as invasive. The fox, always present, either liked or hated, mirrors the migrant's paradoxical position, where presence is undeniable but belonging is denied. The animal should live in a forrest, but, for some reasons, prefers the crowded urban area of London. The family of foxes regularly visit the garden of Polish migrants, Emilia and Konrad. Emilia takes care of the fox family, observes them and feeds them everyday. In her opinion, the animals deserve as good food as her own family.

Daddy Fox was first through the hole. He had beautiful shiny fur and kept his head high. He tried a bit of her fish pie, licked his mouth and looked round. Maybe it was a sign for the rest of the family. Almost immediately Mamusia [Polish word for "mummy']fox arrived too. She was heavily pregnant, taking every steo with slow elegance and caution (Dale 127).

The passage does more than describe two animals; it paints a portrait of family that resonates deeply with human experience. Daddy Fox, stepping forward first, the parent who tastes the food not only to feed himself but to ensure safety for those who will follow. His shiny fur and lifted head give him dignity, the image of someone who carries responsibility. Mamusia Fox, arriving slowly and carefully, embodies patience and care. Her pregnancy

turns each movement into a symbol of protection and fragility. Seen together, their actions mirror the rhythms of human family life: the father guiding with confidence, the mother offering care and protection, and the unspoken bond between them The scene evokes universal themes of love, responsibility, and hope.

Emilia too is portrayed as a caring mother, also expecting another child. The parallel with the fox deepens the sense that motherhood, whether in the wild or in human life, is marked by the need for stability and safety. By aligning Emilia with Mamusia Fox, the narrative emphasises the universality of maternal love—an instinct that transcends species, transcend not only animal species but, above all, transcend nations.

By contrast, in *Happy Nation* the author adopts a more realist mode, creates a testimony, but remains ironical. The story takes the form of a monologue addressed to an immigration officer, a surreal midnight interrogation that becomes a platform for migrant monologue. From the outset, the narrator, Krystyna Kowalska, accepts the situation: "No, you are not upsetting me by asking me for my ID. Not at all. Although you ought to know who I am by now. I am used to having my ID checked" (Dale 67). The tone is ironic, exposing the absurdity of constant surveillance.

All through the story, the narrator declares that she is happy, even as she recalls moments of discomfort. Her repeated claims of happiness carry both irony and resistance, exposing the gulf between the image of the "grateful", but still inferior migrant created by the popular image and the exclusion she really feels. In this way, the insistence on happiness becomes ambivalent—it signals the pressure to perform satisfaction, but also refers to her private life: *"I am still happy and there is nothing you can do to upset me"* (Dale 68). This exaggerated happiness functions as irony, destabilising the frames of *victim* and *villain* described in media discourse. She is neither passive, not threatening, but witty, reflective, and concious of the situation.

The story also integrates historical memory. Recalling her childhood under martial law, the protagonist juxtaposes Barbie dolls with tanks – the symbols of Western capitalism versus communist oppression: *"General Jaruzelski imposed martial law on me and my Barbie. But martial law made me happy because the tanks didn't come. Not many. They stopped"* (Dale 68). The contrast makes clear that resilience is not an abstract quality but something cultivated under specific historical and political pressures, such as authoritarian rule, where strategies of endurance and adaptation become necessary for survival. When individuals later migrate, the strategies are not left behind; surprisingly and disappointingly, they are reshaped and applied again in contemporary situation. In this way, the resilience first forged in the context of political constraint is earticulated in a new context - the ongoing

reconstruction of cultural identity, sense of belonging, and lived experience in an adopted country.

The story reaches its most powerful moment when the narrator thinks about what it means to assimilate: *"I can speak English like a British person now. And that's exactly why you want me go, isn't it? Because you've lost control. You can no longer tell me from the others. White others. I could be white other, or I could just be white"* (Dale 72). What should be a success — speaking the language, integrating into the culture —becomes instead a source of suspicion. The closer she comes to belonging, the more unwanted she becomes. Seemingly, to disrupt established stereotypes appears to be treated as more threatening and unacceptable than conforming to the stereotypical image of the immigrant. To speak English like a British person means pretending to be British and thus aspiring to be better; a form of tricky, dishonest disguise that conceals the individual's real background.

Here the narrator exposes the cruel irony of integration: no matter how much effort the migrant makes, acceptance is never easy. To remain visibly foreign is to be excluded, but to assimilate too well is to erase the very difference that sustains the majority's sense of control. This tension mirrors the stereotypes circulated in British media, where migrants are often portrayed either as cheap labour or as cultural outsiders—figures who can be tolerated only as long as they remain recognisably "other." The repetition of *white* in her words cuts through these clichés, pointing to the instability of categories that claim to fix identity but collapse when confronted with the possibility of being "similar". Dale thus challenges the media image of the immigrant as alien, suggesting instead that the real unease arises from the prospect that migrants both succeed in integrating and simultaneously uncover the contingency of the very borders that marginalize them.

The conclusion of the story introduces an element of the unexpected, disrupting what the reader has been led to anticipate throughout the narrative. Rather than closing in a predictable way—with the migrant silenced, controlled, or expelled—the final scene subverts these expectations by granting the migrant both voice and authority. This surprising turn unsettles the assumed balance of power between officer and migrant, transforming what might have been an image of defeat into one of empowerment. The surprise, then, is not only in the plot twist itself but also in the way the story reconfigures familiar tropes of migration, compelling the reader to rethink notions of vulnerability, authority, and agency.

The woman suddenly changes her tone: *"So wakey, wakey, Mr Michalowski. Please, do let me out"* (Dale 73). In these final lines, the expected hierarchy collapses as the migrant addresses the officer not as a subject to authority but as one who gives commands. The reversal of roles destabilizes the usual script of surveillance and control, suggesting that power

can be reimagined and redistributed through narrative. What might ordinarily be read as a scene of forced removal is instead reframed as a deliberate act of will. Departure, in this context, no longer signifies defeat or exclusion; rather, it becomes a conscious choice, a moment of empowerment in which the migrant actively shapes the terms of leaving. By ending on this note, Dale turns an image of vulnerability into one of resistance, illustrating how literature can reconfigure familiar tropes of migration and authority.

The protagonist resists the role imposed on her: no longer the immigrant harassed in her own home, she herself takes on the role of the surveillant. This shift is crucial, because it destabilizes the familiar narrative of the powerless migrant subject to scrutiny and control. By reversing the gaze, Dale reconfigures the migrant as an active agent rather than a passive object, exposing the fragility of the power structures that normally place state officials or native citizens in the position of authority. What begins as a scene of vulnerability is transformed into one of empowerment, where the migrant's voice unsettles the hierarchy and claims authority on her own terms. In literary terms, such a reversal highlights how fiction can humanize marginalized perspectives, while at the same time dramatizing the symbolic contest over who has the right to look, to name, and to define reality.

From Media Frames to Literary Representation

The hostility dramatized in Smith and Dale finds echoes in the media landscape. The press coverage was analysed by a team of researchers, Heaven Crawley, Simon McMahon and Katharine Jones, from the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University in form of an extensive, 50-page report entitled *Victims and Villains: Migrant Voices in the British Media*. The newspaper which published the most migration articles during the months leading up to the 2015 General Election, analysed in the study, was The Guardian (149 articles), followed by The Times (137), The Daily Mail. The report demonstrates that British newspapers, especially tabloids, employed a binary frame. The findings of *Victims and Villains* may be situated within a broader scholarly tradition concerned with the discursive construction of migration in the public sphere. Informed by Goffman's theorisation of frames as "schemata of interpretation," the report demonstrates that British newspapers in the months preceding the 2015 General Election overwhelmingly articulated migration through the dual registers of "threat" (46%) and "victimhood" (38%), while attributing only marginal salience (10%) to narratives of benefit (Goffman 21; Crawley, McMahon, and Jones 22–23). Migrants were depicted as vulnerable victims — exploited by landlords or employers, overcrowding housing, burdening welfare — or as cunning villains — job stealers, criminals, threats to cultural cohesion. Both frames deny migrants complexity. The *victim* is passive and pitiable, requiring

paternalistic intervention; the *villain* is active and hostile, requiring control. Neither frame allows for the migrant as an ordinary neighbour, colleague, or citizen.

The report also highlights the absence of migrant voices as such:

Of the articles that were analysed in this research, only 15% referenced a migrant voice or perspective. There was considerable variation between newspapers in whether or not a migrant voice or perspective was included in a migration story. 27% of the articles from the Independent referenced a migrant perspective, rising to 33% in the case of the Daily Mirror. By contrast, 97% of the articles from The Sun did not provide a migrant perspective (Crawley, McMahon, and Jones 14–18)

Presented examples rarely included direct opinions from migrants. When they did, the citations were short, selected to reinforce stereotypes rather than to complicate them. The report *Victims and Villains: Migrant Voices in the British Media* (2016) revealed how migrants were consistently portrayed in reductive frames — either as pitiable *victims* or as threatening *villains* — and how their own voices were systematically excluded. They were cast as objects of policy rather than subjects with agency, presented with the set bias. In conclusion, migrants were spoken about, rarely spoken with:

> I feel that we have been excluded from it, completely. We are not even treated as voters. So, we are just those people being talked about. Some talk about us but we have no statement. They are talking about our rights, our service and our lives 1. Introduction (Migrant, Birmingham; Crawley, McMahon, and Jones 8)

The report *Victims and Villains: Migrant Voices in the British Media* demonstrates how the press intensified this binary. Migrants were depicted either as vulnerable victims in need of regulation or as unscrupulous villains threatening British stability (Crawley et al. 14). Both frames compress complexity into caricature. They are forms of what Judith Butler calls "linguistic injury" (Butler 5): words that not only describe but wound, stripping migrants of subjectivity. In the months following the referendum, these frames were enacted in graffiti slogans: *"This is not Europe"*, *"Go home"* (Smith 114). Public walls became surfaces for the performance of exclusion, condensing centuries of discursive hierarchy into two or three words.

They removed me from the article. I guess I don't fit into the stereotype of a Polish migrant because I have a PhD. I guess there is a certain cultural presentation of what a Polish migrant should be, like a plumber. I think it's quite important to look at the cultural presentation, what is the imagined idea of what a perfect idea of migrants from certain parts of the world " (Migrant, London; Crawley, McMahon, and Jones 41)

Migrant Voice is migrant-led organization and was set up in 2010 already before the 2010 general election because a group were concerned about the way that the migrants were discussed in the media. There weren't enough migrants' voices heard but there is a lot of negative rhetoric, which is confirmed by the organisation's Stakeholders:

Before the elections, we had requests from journalists to talk to Romanian and Bulgarian migrants. I told them that we can provide them but when I told them about the professions, academics, dentists, social worker. They said, 'Do you have one with a normal job?' I asked, 'What do you mean by normal job?' They said, 'Someone whom the people can relate to, like a cleaner or carer' " (Crawley, McMahon, and Jones, 41)

The division into victims and villains created by the media denies the complexity of migrant experience and rejects the possibility of existance of successful, well-educated migrants. One of the Stakeholders of the Migrant Voice organisation says:

> The challenge for us is how we use the other people whose stories are not being heard at the moment and how to be more proactive in pitching them to the media so that we get a wider range of voices instead of us just waiting for the phone ring. It rings often at the moment but it is important that we have a wider diversity. The challenge is to keep trying to prevent it from becoming 'If you want a European, you want a poor Eastern European who is working a low-skilled job. If you want a migrant, you want a sob story, a victim story.' We understand that it's what people want but we want to try to twist it a bit or get more opportunities to get the success stories in Crawley, McMahon, and Jones 36)

This statement underlines the tension between media demand and the complexity of migrant experience. On one hand, it acknowledges the tendency of the press to seek out reductive tropes—the "poor Eastern European" or the "tragic migrant victim"—which fit familiar narratives of otherness and vulnerability. On the other hand, it expresses the challenge of diversifying representation by proactively bringing forward stories that disrupt these expectations. What is at stake here is not only visibility but the quality of that visibility: whose voices are amplified, in what context, and with what framing.

The Importance of Migrant Voice in Literary Form

Agnieszka Dale's *Fox Season and Other Short Stories* responds to this discursive violence from within. Her allegory of foxes refracts the animalisation of migrants, showing how the popular discourse reduces human beings to pests or invasive species. Her ironic narrator in *"Happy Nation"* insists on happiness while recounting daily humiliations: *"I am still happy and there is nothing you can do to upset me"* (Dale 42). The irony exposes the violence beneath bureaucratic procedures — ID checks, census categories,

interrogations. In recounting these experiences, Dale reclaims the migrant's voice, transforming silence into testimony.

In one of the interviews Agnieszka Dale was asked by a journalist, Kate Tsurkan: „You say you want to provoke readers. Why do you want to provoke them?" The writer replied: „The provocation comes from the complex that I come from Europe B, that I am not from the mainstream European culture. I am someone different" (Dale, Interview). She also writes about acts of hostility that she experienced as a migrant (Dale, *Stylist*).

Dale's response shows how her literary "provocation" is rooted in her self-perception as coming from *Europe B*, a space marked as peripheral to mainstream European culture. By embracing this position of difference, she turns marginality into a creative strategy, unsettling readers while at the same time exposing the hierarchies embedded in European identity (Wolff; Todorova, Kundera).

Dale's comment is significant as it highlights how questions of cultural identity, marginality, and belonging directly shape literary form and intention. Her notion of "provocation" is not simply a stylistic choice but an aesthetic grounded in her position as a writer from *the outside.* Her narratives are entangled with symbolic geographies and historical hierarchies. In this sense, Dale's work exemplifies how migrant and diasporic literature complicates dominant traditions, expands the canon, and foregrounds voices that destabilize homogenizing ideas of culture and identity.

Why does the migrant voice in literary form matter so much? First, because literature allows for complexity. Where media frames reduce, literature expands. Dale's narrator can be ironic and joyful even in humiliation; she can recall history and speak about bureaucracy in the same breath. The literary voice resists reduction to victim or villain.

Moreover, literature creates empathy. By inhabiting the perspective of a migrant narrator, readers are invited to experience exclusion from within. The monologue in *Happy Nation* draws us into the rhythm of the migrant's voice, making us complicit in the small talk, the memories, the ironies. Literature fosters recognition where media fosters distance.

Finally, literature restores voice. To speak at length, to narrate one's own story, is to resist silencing. Migrants in the media are objects; migrants in literature are subjects. This shift is not merely aesthetic: it reconfigures who gets to narrate the nation. By writing *Fox Season and Other Short Stories*, Dale inscribes migrant voices into British literature. Agnieszka Dale's fiction can be read as an imaginative response to this very dilemma. In *Fox Season and Other Short Stories* she refuses to reduce migrant life to either hardship or assimilation, instead highlighting irony, humour, and ambiguity. Her work offers the kind of "twist" that the media often resist. In this sense, Dale's narratives provide the broader range of voices and experiences that the speaker

identifies as lacking, challenging the media's image of the Eastern European as only a victim or villain stereotype.

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