

The Absent Presence of the Middle Class in Ali Smith's *There But For The* *Ali Smith'in There But For The* Adlı Romanında Orta Sınıfın Olmayan Varlığı

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Abstract

In *There But For The* Ali Smith takes the reader to an existentialist journey in a capitalistic surveillance society where the consumerist middle class contributes to the sustenance of the system by becoming an absent presence. One member of this society shuts himself off of civilization simply by locking himself into the guest room of a couple of strangers during a dinner party only to become an absent presence himself. The havoc he causes through his absence turns him into an even greater presence nationwide. Meanwhile, the discussions that take place at the dinner party and after the realization of the man's rebellious act reveal how the judgmental presence of the people surrounding him actually makes them rather an absence not only in his life but in the society as a whole. The part of the proverb that is left out in the title of the novel ("grace of God, go I") also suggests, right from the beginning, that no matter who it is, their presence will be one of *schadenfreude*. The fact that surveillance has been internalized by the middle class members of the society ironically turns them into an embodiment of the system itself. They are present only as surveillants and judges, while absent when it comes to problem solving. The aim of this paper will be to scrutinize this absent presence of the middle classes as part of an existentialist discussion on civilization and its discontents.

Key Words: surveillance, absent presence, judgement, civilization, schadenfreude

Öz

Ali Smith *There But For The* adlı romanında okuru tüketici orta sınıfın olmayan bir varlık haline gelerek sistemin sürdürülmesine katkıda bulunduğu gözetlemeci kapitalist toplumda varoluşsal bir yolculuğa çıkarmaktadır. Bu toplumun üyelerinden biri bir akşam yemeği toplantısı esnasında kendisini tanımadığı bir çift insanın misafir odasına kilitlemek suretiyle kendini medeniyetten soyutlarken aslında kendisi de olmayan bir varlığa dönüşmektedir. Yok oluşuyla yarattığı kargaşa onu ulus çapında daha da büyük bir var oluşa dönüştürür. Bu esnada, akşam yemeğinde ve adamın eyleminin altında yatan isyanın fark edilmesinden sonra süregelen tartışmalar çevresindeki insanların yargılayıcı varlıklarının onları yalnızca adamın hayatında değil, aynı zamanda toplumun genelinde aslında bir var olmayışa dönüştürdüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Romanın başlığında kullanılan atasözünün eksik bırakılmış olan kısmı (grace of God, go I) daha en baştan var olan her kim olursa olsun bu kişinin varlığının başkalarının açısından zevk almak üzerine temellendirileceğini ima etmektedir. Gözetlemenin toplumun orta sınıf üyeleri tarafından içselleştirilmiş olması gerçeği ironik bir biçimde bu üyeleri sistemin vücut bulmuş bir haline çevirmektedir. Bu üyeler yalnızca gözetlemeciler ve yargıçlar olarak var olmakta, ancak iş sorunların çözümüne geldiğinde aynı üyeler ortadan kaybolmaktadırlar. Bu makalenin amacı orta sınıfın bu var olmayan varlığını medeniyet ve medeniyetin hoşnutsuzlukları bağlamında varoluşsal bir tartışma olarak incelemektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: gözetleme, olmayan varlık, yargılama, medeniyet, başkalarının açısından zevk almak

Introduction

In Ali Smith's novel, *There But For The*, the whole story revolves around a man called Miles Garth who attends a dinner party in the house of a couple of strangers as the guest of a man he barely knows. Right after the main course Miles goes upstairs and locks himself in the spare bedroom not to come out for months. The novel is divided into four parts narrated from the viewpoint of a different character each of whom is only tangentially related to Miles. As Ben Davies (2017) contends: "Miles' move into the room therefore gathers narrative entities together – characters and their stories – as the spare room is the space around and through which the narrative is structured and the strands come into their presence, their textual space and being" (p. 511). Each part of the novel starts with a word from the title. In the first part Anna Hardie, who met Miles as a teenager during a trip to Europe as the prize for a writing contest,

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questions what it means to be *there*. The second part is about Mark Palmer who meets Miles at the theatre and invites him to this dinner party he doesn't want to go to *but* has to. In the centre of this second part is a theatrical two-page long dialogue between the two men on the function of the word "but". The third part is about May Young, Miles' childhood friend Jennifer's mother, an old woman with dementia staying in a hospital and speaking only "in the confines of her own head", stuck in the past with the memories of her daughter who died as a teenager. One of the most vivid memories May has of her daughter is the one question she asked all the family members:

What is humanity *for*?" The final part is told from the viewpoint of a little girl, Brooke Bayoude, who attends the dinner party with her academic parents, calls herself first a "cleverist," then a "historian," and takes on the task of chronicling Miles' story because she believes that histories and stories are extremely important "even if all we know is that we don't know (Smith, 2012, p. 295).

Brooke muses on the fact that the definite article can be left out as in newspaper headlines but the reader would still acknowledge its presence, just as crowds of people acknowledging the presence of Miles (after his story becomes a nationwide phenomenon), even though they had never seen him and know nothing about him. By the end of the novel the history of Miles is yet to be written and this is the point where the reader can perhaps complete the elliptical title. Put together, with Miles and his story in the centre, all these narrative entities contribute to the portrayal of the middle class as absent presence. The aim of the following paragraphs will be to scrutinise the nature and reasons behind this middle class attitude and its consequent impact on individuals such as Miles, Mark and Anna.

The term absent presence that will be employed here in the analysis of the middle class attitude and also of Miles as the central figure of the novel will be based on a Heideggerian understanding of Being. Heidegger (1962) refers to Dasein as the priority of existentia over essentia, that is, Being-present-at-hand over Being-what-it-is (p. 67). By locking himself in, Miles seems to be trying to step out of existence. He is there in the world, but he is not *there*. So Being-present-at-hand is not enough, for Dasein requires Being-in. Heidegger (1962) explains this difference between Being-in-the-world and Being-in as follows:

An entity present-at-hand within the world can be touched by another entity only if by its very nature the latter entity has Being-in as its own kind of Being [...] When two entities are present-at-hand within the world, and furthermore are *worldless* in themselves, they can never 'touch' each other, nor can either of them 'be' 'alongside' the other (p. 81).

Therefore, only if one is *there* within his/her own being, can they actually be *there* for others.

In a similar context, Anna Hardie, after being called over into Genevieve Lee's house as a possible old friend who can get this Miles person out of their spare room, knocks on the door and asks "Miles, [...] Are you there?" (Smith, 2012, p. 5) Thus begins her own existential investigation after waking up from a dream in which she sees her heart heavily crusted: "In the middle of the night, some months later, holding her own heart, feeling nothing, Anna had looked at herself in the mirror in the bathroom. There she was. It was the there-she-was guise" (Smith, 2012, p. 7). Anna feels that way because she is aware of her own pretence as a Senior Liaison at the Centre for Temporary Permanence where she interviews refugees arriving from all over the world and writes a report "fit[ting] these true stories, their whole life stories in some cases, on to just two-thirds of one side of [...] A4" so that they will be judged either as credible or not (Smith, 2012, p. 54). Anna's realization of the hypocrisy that her job entails makes her

question her own presence. She says: “In my job I had to make people not matter so much. That was what my job really was, though ostensibly I was there to *make* people matter” (p. 54 italics original). She writes the real-life stories of rape and torture “in as shorthand a form as possible” (p. 59-60) for which she is praised by her area head who says: “You have exactly the right kind of absent presence. Best of all, your reports are 95% word-length perfect” (p. 61). While trying to remember her interaction with Miles Garth when they were kids, Anna realizes that at the time they toured Europe she wasn’t really there at all. But once Miles stole her passport from the tour staff and presented it to her saying “there you are”, she felt actually *there* (p. 48). Because from that point on she had the freedom to move any way she wished. Hers was no longer a temporary permanence, unlike the refugees for whom she was an absent-presence, and *that* thanks to Miles’ actual presence, his being *there* for her.

Miles is also a refugee, since he takes refuge in the spare bedroom of the Lee House. The Lees call him O.U.T.: “Our Unwanted Tenant” (p. 14) and feed him ham even though they know he is a vegetarian, saying “Beggars can’t be choosers” (p. 22). They want to lure him out by starving him and also “they don’t want him to get too at home” (p. 22). The references to refugees also make one consider the significance of the setting – Greenwich- which “was all about the visible-invisible borders” (p. 112). In the last part we see Brooke stepping across the Meridian Line over and over, and feeling herself a Free Agent; nobody stops her to check her passport. Furthermore, the conversation at the dinner party on the necessity of borders functions as an indicator of the middle-class pretence as Terence Bayoude, Brooke’s father, sarcastically points out in reply to Richard: “The whole world, Richard says. It’s, well, a more or less borderless world. And that’s as it should be” (p. 146). However, Brooke, the little member of a black family, has been at the border before, where she and her parents were taken into a small office with cameras in the ceiling and a double-sided mirror and were kept waiting for two hours and forty-five minutes before being let go without any explanation. That is why, Brooke responds to Richard’s statement saying: “Except for the borders where they check your passport for hours” (p. 146). The border is nothing like the Meridian Line. Richard says, “Yes, *but* everywhere needs some defence against people just coming in and overrunning the place with their terrorisms or their deficiencies” (p. 146). The use of “*but*” here is an example of cases which indicate middle class pretence, as is made obvious in the conversation on the use of the word “*but*” between Miles and Mark the night they had met at the theatre (p. 174-5). The word “*but*” functions as a means of turning away from reality and hiding one’s insensitivity behind the pretence that comes after “*but*”. Mark asks Miles: “Is it always *but*, can it be *and*?” (p. 175). Later on, in a letter, Miles explains to Mark the meaning of the word “*but*” as a conjunction (p. 195-6); as a conjunction it means connection, union, combination, simultaneous occurrence in space and time. A conjuncture, on the other hand “is a combination of circumstances, especially one leading to a crisis.” The use of the word “*but*” as a conjunction in a sentence, instead of connecting people or ideas, ironically, distances them from each other, thereby leading to a crisis. As in the following sentence: “Yeah, I know [his name is Miles and not Milo] [...] *But* Milo’s better [...] It’s catchier” (p. 191). Thus, a conjunction turns into a conjuncture in the hands of the absent-present middle class. Noticing this in Richard’s way of thinking, “That’s right, Terence says. Got to keep all those bad refugees out. The ones looking for a better life. Couldn’t agree more, Richard says. Humankind has needed fortifications since the start of

humankind started” (p. 146). Here Richard represents the paradox of modern life: people’s need to shield their possessions by constructing walls all around themselves, as well as their desire to see beyond other people’s walls. Since Richard fails to see the irony there, Terence has to underline this middle-class pretence with reference to the new industry of surveillance drones Richard is so proud of selling. So Terence says: “And all this time since the start of the start of humankind we’ve needed little helicopters with cameras in, so we can see over our neighbours’ fortifications. It’s a triumph of civilization” (p. 146-7).

The pretence is not only about admitting the necessity of fortification (thereby of privacy) on the one hand and the desire to surveil on the other, but it is also about people’s assimilation to this surveillance society which basically turns the whole thing into a vicious circle; they pretend because they know they are being watched and judged all the time. According to David Lyon (2009) this assimilation legitimizes surveillance societies. He argues: “The notion of a surveillance society is also given credence by the fact that in ordinary everyday life not only are people constantly being watched, they are also willing, it seems, to use technical devices to watch others” (p. 10). TV shows, social networks, smart phone applications, in short most of technology is dedicated to finding out what other people are doing, where they are going, what they are watching, what they are eating, whether they’ve read your messages, the last time they were online, who they are with etc. The list of things one can gather information about via technology is endless. Why do people need so much information on one another? Keith Guzik (2016) explains, with information technologies surveillance has turned into “dataveillance” which is used for social sorting:

safe/legitimate and dangerous/illegitimate travellers at borders, desirable and undesirable citizens on the streets, automobility and pedestrian mobility at urban intersections, good risks and bad risks for criminal rehabilitation in courts and prisons, and so on (p. 180-2).

This argument resonates with Anna’s thoughts on her Agency’s state of the art new detectors that can detect the heartbeats or breathing of the refugees trying to enter the country invisibly, hence illegally. Yet, Anna is the one who knows that detecting their presence is not enough to know their stories. All human beings living in modern *civilizations* are surrounded by cameras, drones, CCTVs and mobile phones. When Anna spots three CCTV cameras on a street she thinks of it as narcissism “this mad filming of ourselves all the time” (Smith, 2012, p. 62). She shouts at one of the cameras filming her sitting on a wall: “Go on, prove I was there. Show us what it meant, that I was” (Smith, 2012, p. 65). Again the question becomes what it means to be *there* and how anyone can tell what really is going on just by seeing your presence. This usurpation of human beings by technology, results in modern day individuals’ absent presence. Heidegger (1962) argues that “an entity ‘within-the-world’ has Being-in-the-world in such a way that it can understand itself as bound up in its ‘destiny’ with the Being of those entities which it encounters within its own world” (p. 82). However, in today’s world technology comes between the individual and his/her encounter with other beings. Ironically, the technological means of surveillance increase the distance between individuals keeping them miles away from actual human touch. As Brooke’s mother explains for instance, if you are talking on your mobile phone on a train, then you’re not *there* on the train (Smith, 2012, p. 50). You are not encountering with others sharing the same space; therefore, your existence there is but pretence.

Thus, the recurrent references to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the novel ("words, words, words") take on a different meaning where we are reminded of the famous line from the play – "all the world is a stage" – and see the dinner party as a play the guests of which are the players who are constantly pretending to be someone/something other than what they actually are. More importantly, they pretend to be *there* when they really are not. This is obvious right at the beginning where the reader is told how Gen and Eric Lee (the Generics) choose their guests for what they call their "annual alternative dinner party":

Once a year they liked to invite people who were a bit different from the people they usually saw [...] It was always interesting to branch out. Last year they had invited a Muslim couple; the year before they had had a Palestinian man and his wife and a Jewish doctor and his partner (p. 18).

This time they invite a gay man (they assume Miles is his partner) and a black family. The party is a microcosm of the whole society, where the hosts and the regular guests carry out the social sorting process pretty much like Anna did at her agency with the refugees. So the *irregular* guests have a temporary permanence at this annual party and the hosts have the required absent presence to observe and judge them as credible or not. In "a room full of strangers" (p. 115) people assume that Miles is Mark's partner, they raise their eyebrows and refer to gay people as "they" or "you lot": "He didn't comment on my clothes at all. They're supposed to comment on your clothes, Hannah is saying. And he's not as neat and clean as they usually are. They're usually more pressed or ironed or something" (p. 163); "It is possible now for you lot to adopt, isn't it?" (p. 124). Similarly, Hannah "asks the Bayoudes if they've ever seen a real tiger at home. Not in Yorkshire, they say. She asks where they're from originally. They tell her they were living in Harrogate and working at the University of York, which is where they met" (p. 127). When she makes similar comments later on about the importance of knowing one's own culture, Brooke cannot help asking: "Have you not met any or very many black people before or are you just living in a different universe?" (134) Hannah's assumptions are based on her indifference, which obviously leads to total ignorance. With her questions she only pretends to be present-at-hand. However, when Miles tells them what he does for a living, Hannah is the only person who gives a genuine reaction instead of pretending to be impressed: "I'm an ethical consultant, Miles says. Ah, Hugo says. Mm, Richard says. Ooh, Jan says. What on earth's an ethical consultant? Hannah says" (p. 128). Miles' description of his work shows that his job is a part of the pretence that lies at the bottom of this surveillance society: "What it means is, I work for firms who want to ensure they're ethically sound, or who would like to present themselves as more ethically sound" (p. 129). Miles, just like Anna thanks to him, has awakened to his own absent presence and seems to be trying to solve this existential puzzle by temporarily removing himself from social existence. Mark questions Miles' act through rhymes in the shape that her dead mother used to put them, as she seems to be an absent presence in his mind after forty-seven years: "[But] *would a man in shutting himself in/be asking things to stop or to begin? [...] Would he be testing whether he'd be missed/ would such inversion mean he'd not exist?*" (Smith, 2012, p. 85 italics original). Miles cannot step out of existence by shutting himself in, since his physical absence turns him into an even larger presence in society, as will be explained shortly. However, his absence saves himself from the judgement he constantly receives from the absent-present middle class. At this point, it would be proper to note that when the chapter titles, which as Currie suggests "are both on the outside (as names) and the

inside (as beginnings) of sections” (p. 49), are taken with each sentence they belong to and put together one after the other, the result is a summary of Miles’ existential ordeal:

There was once a man who, one night between the main course and the sweet at a dinner party, went upstairs and locked himself in one of the bedrooms of the house of the people who were giving the dinner party./But would a man in shutting himself in, be asking things to stop or to begin?/For there was no more talking out loud now, and there wouldn’t be neither, not for any money, not for anybody./The fact is, London might not always be here! There have been times in the history of London that London practically stopped existing!

By putting a stop to his existence in society, by taking a break from being, Miles manages to protect himself – albeit only for a while – from the absent-present middle class talking out loud. Thus, for Miles, the London around him, the group of surveillants and judges, stop existing as well. It might be considered a long intermission to this play of pretence, or rather a pause: during his break Miles makes thousands of miles on the exercise bike and yet does not go anywhere, because once he gets out of the room the play will resume from where he left.

In the middle of the party, Mark remembers a poem from his childhood:

Fury said to a mouse, That he met in the house, ‘Let us both go to law: I will prosecute You. – Come, I’ll take no denial; we must have a trial: For really, this morning I’ve nothing to do.’ Said the mouse to the cur, ‘Such a trial, dear Sir, with no jury or judge, would be wasting our breath.’ ‘I’ll be the judge, I’ll be the jury,’ said cunning old Fury: ‘I’ll try the whole cause, and condemn you to death.’ (p. 162)

Mark thinks Miles would be the only person to be interested in and to understand the poem, which is accurate since all the other people in the room play the part of Fury. This reference to the Furies, the Greek goddesses of revenge, together with the resemblance of Miles’ situation to that of *hikikomori* [a term which is “used to describe more than half a million Japanese (80 percent male) who withdraw from all social ties — work, school, friends, hobbies, etc., and lock themselves in their bedrooms often whittling away their time on the internet, playing video games, or watching TV” (Louie, 2017)] may suggest that Miles’ act is but a passive-aggressive reaction against the pressures of society; a means of making a statement without words that he refuses to play *their* game, but will play his own. As Heller and Feher (1988) argue, “modernity is a decentred society without a single center” (p. 31), however in the novel everyone either wants to be in the centre or they force someone into the centre. This act of meddling with the centre contributes to their absent-presence, since the signified they are aiming at is forever deferred and they are too self-absorbed to see their own part in this process of *différance*. They fail to see their own aggression stemming from what Freud (1961) calls “the narcissism of minor differences” (p. 72). At the beginning of the novel, Anna’s colleague Denny argues that “he could sum up the last six decades of journalism in six words [...] I was there. There I was [...] By the middle of the twentieth century every important report put it like this: *I was there*. Nowadays: *There I was*” (Smith, 2012, p. 7). The implication here is that in modern societies people would emphasize their own presence putting themselves in the centre even when they were outside the action, therefore an absent presence as mere witnesses.

Miles, in his discontent with the civilization, locks himself up away from all that surveillance, observation and judgement, however he ends up being in the centre of it all, only through his absence. Locking himself in, he inadvertently creates a reversed panopticon with the “Milo Multitude [...] The Milo Masses. Newspapers call it Milo Madness, Milo Mania, Milo Mayhem” (Smith, 2012, p. 311). At the very beginning of the novel, Anna, while thinking

about her own job, about journalism, about television or laptop screens and still questioning the meaning of being *there*, gives it a new name:

Tennis Players' Psychosis (TPP), where you went through life believing that an audience was always watching you, profoundly moved by your every move, reacting round your every reaction, your every momentous moment, with joy/excitement/disappointment/Schadenfreude (Smith, 2012, p. 8).

Miles finds himself in the middle of such a situation where people camping outside the Lee House wait for days just to get a glimpse of his hand through the window, even though, ironically, he was just trying to shut himself off to the world and turn his gaze inward where he met his childhood self.

Miles' act makes both Anna and Gen question the same thing. Anna asks: "Was it some wanky kind of middle-class game about how we're all prisoners even though we believe we're free as a bird?" (p. 66-7) For instance, some of these middle-class people, like Caroline from the dinner party, think that having a wide variety of toothpastes to choose from is freedom, which Hugo points out to be an illusion with reference to Andy Warhol, which in turn brings about a new argument on contemporary art as pretence. That is why, when Bernice Bayoude brings up the subject of Mark's mother's famous painting series in which she gradually reveals a certain reality about the woman in the painting, instead of getting the message that is explicitly given on the last page of the novel that "under the surface there is a whole other thing always happening" (p. 356), they begin to judge the artist for having left her child alone at a young age. The irony here is that their judgement of first the painting and then of the artist is exactly what the artist tries to point at through her work. The tied ankles and wrists, and the sown eyelids of the woman in the painting stand for her judgement by others, who keep watching her but refuse to see beyond her mask and into her eyes. The dinner guests constantly make comments and pass judgement while pretending to listen, understand or be interested:

Mark, shaken, realizes he has just made the terrible mistake of not just seeming to be but actually being sincere. It finally strikes him that this conversation about art probably takes place every time these people meet for dinner like this (Smith, 2012, p. 153).

The references to contemporary art may bring about the question whether Miles' act could be considered a very subtle touch upon modern performance art; a discussion of the boundary between art and reality in that an obvious artistic purpose completely changing the perception of reality. As Marcel Duchamp showed through his *Fountain*, in fact, the artistic purpose highlights the pretence; the middle class audience would appreciate the performance if it were presented to them as art, though their appreciation would be a superficial one as it was with Faye's paintings.

Just as they refuse to look at Faye's paintings closely, because the reality is horrible, they refuse to take a close look at the people around them as well. That is why, they find unrealistic solutions to feed a vegetarian, nobody but Miles realizes Mark has been waiting to be served some red wine the whole evening, they forget the existence of a child among them and say things like "anal" and nobody but Brooke realizes that at one point during the several months he spent in the room, Miles had unlocked the door. Nobody even knocks on his door, yet "the Milo Madness" continues outside. Miles, the dinner guests, the refugees are all ontically *there*, but ontologically they are not. "Clearly he's not all there," Genevieve Lee says. "He *is* all there, the child behind the chair said. Where else could he be? Genevieve Lee ignored

this too, as if the child simply wasn't there" (p. 22 italics original). As this one of many examples show Brook Bayoude, the little girl, is also an absent presence in the world of adults. To the reader of the novel, she is fully present. However, to the characters of the novel, except for Miles and Anna no one seems to acknowledge her presence. It does not seem to be a coincidence that the two characters who are in the process of their own existential investigations feel close to this fully present child who is yet untainted by the social prejudices of the adult world.

Gen, in the newspaper article she writes, reveals her own alienation after having lived with a stranger in the house for three months. She writes: "Perhaps in some ways metaphorically we are all like this man 'Milo' – all of us locked in a room in a house belonging to strangers" (p. 106). After this newspaper article, Miles becomes a nationwide story, the dinner party turns into a version of the Last Supper, as Miles is transformed into Milo. Thus, he is given a new identity, people living in tents they set up outside begin to talk about Milo's miracles, the TV people filming the crowds volunteering, collecting donations, cheering and also setting up stalls to establish their own Milo enterprises, give Miles' story the shape *they* want: "The Milo Merchandise," "Milo High Club," "Smile-O For Milo," "Milo For Palestine," "Milo For Israel's Endangered Children," "Milo For Peace," "Not In Milo's Name," "Milo For Troops Out of Afghanistan" (Smith, 2012, p. 314-315). In his absence Miles is in the centre of all this, however he is not in charge of any of it. The people are there, however they are not interested in Miles *per se*, they are only interested in the show. They watch, but they see nothing. May mistaking the word Internet for *intimate* underlines the irony that where people assume they are connecting with each other intimately, in fact they are miles away from each other with no real communication whatsoever. In a similar line, she thinks mobile phones and answering machines enable people to *pretend* to be there for one another, when in reality these things put a distance between them, turning the users of these machines into absent presences: "It was all the intimate, and answerphones and things you had to speak at rather than to. Nobody there" (Smith, 2012, p. 214). They are there only as pretence, hence of no help. In a similar vein, it turns out that Gen Lee's complaints about a stranger invading her spare bedroom are also as pretentious as her hospitality, since she keeps the show going, not telling anyone that Miles had left the room. Even though it is a *spare* room, her complaint in the newspaper article suggests that she cannot spare it for a stranger. The Lees try to maintain the pretence of a happy middle class family with close relationships, while Gen admits that having all that space makes her feel lucky that they "can all sit in different rooms in this house" (Smith, 2012, p. 155); thereby underlining the estrangement of the members of even the smallest unit of this society.

The last part of the novel circles back to the beginning where Miles is already locked in the room, encountering his ten-year-old self who tries to help him take out the censorship strips that cover his eyes and his mouth. So Miles is *there but* he neither can see nor speak, just like the woman in Mark's mother's painting. May Young thinks children can see everything that the adults ignore, choose to forget or cover up. May thinks: "That's what the babies did, after all, when they were born. They looked a look at the world as if they could see something that your own eyes couldn't, or had forgotten how to" (p. 213). Similarly, Brooke is the only one who is aware of everything that is going on around her, who speaks about these things out loud without any filtering and she is the only one who actually communicates with Miles. As a child

she is fully present. She cannot make sense of the fact that people get into queues to see Miles or to watch the sufferings of others as when in the past “people actually paid money to a pensioner sailor to watch somebody be executed through a telescope!” (Smith, 2012, p. 288). They are *there* only for the schadenfreude. When Jennifer asks her mother, May, what human beings are for, May replies “for looking after each other” (p. 258). However, in the contemporary surveillance societies it seems that human beings are there only to look *at* each other. Maybe that is why, her brother Patrick’s reaction to Jennifer’s death is anger at the thought of the obscurity of her death: “She just went. Nobody saw. There’s nobody there to see” (Smith, 2012, p. 239); nobody to say *there I was*. In a similar line, as Mark walks around the park, right at the point when he notices the Camera Obscura, his absent present mother Faye rhymes inside his head about a bird that flies into a wall and falls down dead, and “*people undeterred/stepping over the mound of the broken bird*” (Smith, 2012, p. 169 italics original). Mark constantly hearing her late mother’s voice inside his head resonates with May speaking only within the confines of her own head. They are both similar to Miles in that they are also shutting themselves off to all the judgement surrounding them. That is why, as a gay and Jewish man who overhears his own judgement at the dinner party, Mark thinks “The nice chap, Miles, is safe behind” the door, not being looked at (Smith, 2012, p. 168). Miles is safe from the judgement.

Ben Davies (2017) argues that Smith’s text “itself is a spatiotemporal dwelling, one that invites the reader to stay-within-it temporally, even if only temporarily” (p. 516). In that context, both Miles’ occupancy of the spare bedroom and the reader’s dwelling in the text can be considered temporary permanence. Here the Heideggerean concept of Being-in amounts to being there, which translates as *dwelling*. In an analysis of the etymology of the word “building” [bauen] in German, Heidegger (1971) argues that in the original sense the word meant “to dwell”; and the verb “to be” as in “I am” [Ich bin] also originates from the same word, thereby meaning “I dwell” (p. 2). In a similar vein, an etymological investigation of the word “space” would reveal that “space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 7). Thus, in order to dwell in space – say, in a room – a person first should learn how to dwell within themselves; make room for themselves in their temple of the soul and then make room for others in the boundaries of their own space. Only when one is there within themselves, can one be there in the room and then there for others. Genevieve Lee cannot even dwell in the same room with her own family members, let alone in the same house with a guest. The refugees are not welcome to dwell in foreign countries. The marginals, those who do not meet the standards, cannot share the same space as those who are there to judge them. In that sense, as Davies (2017) argues, the reader’s dwelling in Smith’s text “shows how Miles’s stay disrupts those around him and provokes questions concerning our usual, commonplace assumptions about dwelling, time, and space” (p. 518).

The project that Brooke’s mother is involved in at the university gives humankind two options:

It’s about which you would choose: you can enjoy a really lovely treat yourself, but because you do someone else somewhere will have to suffer. Or: you can choose to suffer with somebody who’s also having a really difficult time, but because you do, the suffering will be easier for that other person (p. 324).

The latter is what Brooke does with Miles since the beginning of the incident. She exchanges notes with him and once she discovers the door unlocked, they have face to face interaction. Freud (1961) suggests that “the development of the individual [is] a product of the interaction between two urges, the urge towards happiness, which we usually call ‘egoistic’, and the urge towards union with others in the community, which we call ‘altruistic’” (p. 105). The concept of altruism is emphasized through May’s memories as well, in which she recalls a movie plot by her favourite actress. The movie character takes in a poor girl abused by her father, but then the woman’s kindness gets the girl in a bad mood and in her anger she starts breaking things. The woman tells the girl to go ahead: “Because I believe there’s something that has been put in you by all that’s happened to you and it’s got to come out” (Smith, 2012, p. 262-3). The woman in the movie does not just look at the girl but she looks after her, because she doesn’t just watch her but she sees her; just as May is able to see Miles and Josie, Gen Lee’s daughter.

The problem that civilization faces is a lack of such altruism and an excess of aggression stemming from the narcissism of minor differences. That is the main reason behind the absent-presence of the middle class and the solution to the problem is just *there* to be seen in the children if only one would choose to look. Ali Smith portrays this through the messages that children wrote to God in a book in a church:

Please help dads friend Tim rest safely in hevean [sic] because my family and I miss him much Thanks God Amen. God, please pray for my mum and close friends, for them to stay healthy and be happy Thank you for all the nice things happening in my life. Pray for me to stay in good health thank you. Sat 3rd Dear God – Please help MARIO RINGER be calm/patient whilst he is at home awaiting for his broken ankle (which has been pinned and plated) to be mended Thank you. (p. 328, italics original)

The novel basically is about making you think what happens when you leave something out; a person, a descriptive word like gay or black, half of the title of a book, an explanation, a memory, half of the life story of a refugee etc. What happens is, you force the perception of a *desired* presence in the absence of the reality, thereby turning your own self into an absent-presence who pretends to be *there* for something/someone *but* indeed not.

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