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THE FACTOR

OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN BRITISH LITERATURE

EL FACTOR DE LA IDENTIDAD NACIONAL EN LA LITERATURA BRITÁNICA

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ABSTRACT

National self-awareness is a primary and disputed dimension of collective affiliation, to which appeal is made in historical memory, political ritual, and cultural symbolism. Although the social sciences have traditionally examined British national identity from the perspectives of state-formation and civic nationalism, the literary productions analogous to those—whereby authors imagine, negotiate, and critique "Englishness," "Britishness," and their ethnic and civic complicities—have drawn relatively scant systematic notice. This research addresses that gap by examining how British literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries encodes themes of national self-awareness, through an interdisciplinary methodology that pairs close reading of exemplary texts with theoretical frameworks from nationalism studies and postcolonial theory. The study of canonical writers (i.e., Orwell, Kipling, Forster, and Dickens) alongside postmodern writers reveals literature habitually employs island metaphors, memory rituals, and everyday cultural practices—such as afternoon tea and borderland encounters—to naturalize and destabilize monolithic identity constructions. Our results demonstrate literary texts are double-edged instruments: they can cement state-sanctioned identities while also exposing their exclusions and contradictions. In charting these narrative strategies, the study contributes a nuanced model for the integration of literary analysis into broader discourse on national identity, multiculturalism, and devolution. The implications extend to Brexit-era politics and cultural memory contests of today, and point to the ongoing possibility for literature to serve as a valuable archive and resource for resistance in the face of socio-political transformation.

Keywords: Britain, England, Literature, Self-awareness, National identity.

RESUMEN

La autoconciencia nacional es una dimensión primaria y controvertida de la afiliación colectiva, a la que se apela en la memoria histórica, los rituales políticos y el simbolismo cultural. Si bien las ciencias sociales han examinado tradicionalmente la identidad nacional británica desde las perspectivas de la formación del Estado y el nacionalismo cívico, las producciones literarias análogas "en las que los autores imaginan, negocian y critican la "inglesidad", la "britanicidad" y sus complicidades étnicas y cívicas¨ han recibido relativamente poca atención sistemática. Esta investigación aborda esta deficiencia examinando cómo la literatura británica de los siglos XX y XXI codifica temas de autoconciencia nacional, mediante una metodología interdisciplinaria que combina la lectura atenta de textos ejemplares con marcos teóricos de los estudios del nacionalismo y la teoría poscolonial. El estudio de escritores canónicos (es decir, Orwell, Kipling, Forster y Dickens) junto con escritores posmodernos revela que la literatura emplea habitualmente metáforas isleñas, rituales de memoria y prácticas culturales cotidianas como el té de la tarde y los encuentros fronterizos" para naturalizar y desestabilizar las construcciones identitarias monolíticas. Los resultados demuestran que los textos literarios son armas de doble filo: pueden cimentar identidades sancionadas por el Estado y, al mismo tiempo, exponer sus exclusiones y contradicciones. Al trazar estas estrategias narrativas, el estudio aporta un modelo matizado para

la integración del análisis literario en un discurso más amplio sobre la identidad nacional, el multiculturalismo y la descentralización. Las implicaciones se extienden a la política de la era del Brexit y a los debates sobre la memoria cultural actuales, y señalan la posibilidad constante de que la literatura sirva como un valioso archivo y recurso para la resistencia ante la transformación sociopolítica.

Palabras clave: Gran Bretaña, Inglaterra, Literatura, Autoconciencia, Identidad nacional.

INTRODUCTION

National identity constitutes a phenomenon of extraordinary complexity, as it lies at the confluence of multiple dimensions—historical, political, cultural, and symbolic—that interact in a dynamic and often contradictory manner (Petkova, 2006). It is not merely a subjective sentiment shared by a human group, but a social construction in which collective narratives, founding myths, state institutions, and everyday practices converge (Gabrielsson et al., 2025). In its most basic manifestation, national identity is the perception of belonging to a political community defined by territorial borders and internationally recognized; however, in the case of British identity, its roots extend far beyond the notion of the nation-state that emerged in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries (Tranter & Donoghue, 2021).

The problem is that this perception of belonging is not static, but evolves in step with historical transformations (wars, colonizations, revolutions), economic processes (industrialization, globalization), ideological disputes (ethnic vs. civic nationalisms), and cultural phenomena (literature, art, media). For example, in the British context, the historical relationship between England and the rest of the islands—Scotland, Wales, and Ireland—has changed drastically from unification under the English Crown to the postcolonial perception of "Great Britain" as a multicultural political project. Thus, British identity is strained by shared and divergent memories: imperial pride, Celtic resistance, post-imperial migration, and new waves of global mobility (Wraight & Green, 2024).

The study of national identity cuts across disciplines as diverse as political science, sociology, cultural anthropology, and literary studies. Political science analyzes how the state constructs and reproduces national narratives—through symbols, anthems, ceremonies, and educational policies—to legitimize its authority. Sociology investigates how individuals internalize or challenge these discourses, giving rise to local, regional, or transnational identity practices (Greenfeld & Eastwood, 2009). Literary studies, for their part, offer a privileged window into how literature produces, refracts, and challenges notions of belonging and otherness, shaping imaginaries that nurture a sense of community or fracture it from within (UKEssays, 2018).

Historically, British national identity has very ancient and deep roots in British literature. It would not be right to seek a solution to this issue without examining the pages of the empire's history. Ensuring that the issue of national self-awareness of a people is investigated in the right direction necessarily involves studying the history of that people. The history of the people and the path of struggle they have gone through are among the main factors that play a major role in the formation of their identity. The British Empire also has a complex and serious national identity problem. Sometimes, when we say "Britain" and "England," we mean the same geographical area. There are many objective reasons for this. Thus, England makes up 81% of the territory of Great Britain. Centuries ago, other peoples—the Scots, Irish, and Welsh—were united under English rule. Today, the political center of Great Britain is located in England, and the superiority of the English in Britain cannot be denied. In fact, "Britain" has a formal character as a political term, and "British," which includes political citizenship, is today alien, artificial, and unacceptable for the peoples living in the empire. They still insist today on calling themselves by their historical affiliations, such as "English," "Scots," "Irish," and "Welsh."

Specifically, in the field of British literature, the relevance of this study lies in the constant revision of national narratives in the face of challenges such as postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and Brexit. Contemporary and canonical works engage with each other, demonstrating that the tension between "Britishness" and the various "Englishnesses," "Scottishnesses," and "Welshnesses" is not simply a theoretical debate, but a concrete experience that permeates everyday life: political debates, media representations, festivities, and practices of collective memory. Thus, understanding national identity in British literature allows us to understand not only a historical heritage, but also current struggles for recognition, equality, and the redistribution of cultural power.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyze how British literature reflects and problematizes the processes of national self-awareness and the identity tensions between the concepts of "Britishness" and "Englishness," especially in the post-imperial context. To this end, it examines literary examples that illustrate the different ways in which the peoples of the United Kingdom have represented their cultural and national identity throughout history, with an emphasis on the evolution of the concept of "Englishness" in relation to historical, religious, geographical, and cultural factors. The research method combines

an interdisciplinary approach that integrates historical, sociopolitical, and literary studies, including the analysis of recognized works, as well as contemporary critical studies on nationalism and postcolonialism.

DEVELOPMENT

National self-awareness can be understood as the shared perception a people has of themselves, their common past, and their future aspirations. It is not a merely spontaneous feeling, but the result of processes of collective "imagination"—in the words of Benedict Anderson—that create an "Imagined Community." This awareness is rooted in historical narratives, symbols, and myths that legitimize the group's authority and define its boundaries vis-à-vis the "other." An early example in the British context is the figure of the Venerable Bede (d. 735), considered the "father of English history" for his chronicle of the Anglo-Saxons. Bede not only compiled religious and legendary episodes but also contributed to forging a shared memory that distinguished the Anglo-Saxons from other peoples of the islands and linked their destiny to a sacred narrative. Thus, national self-awareness is nourished by historical struggles (wars of independence, internal rebellions) and cultural traditions (festivities, oral literature, religiosity). These practices reinforce the idea of a common past and legitimize territorial or political claims. For example, commemorations of the Battle of Hastings (1066) or the signing of Magna Carta (1215) are not only acts of remembrance, but political rituals that reassign authority and reinforce a national imaginary. Likewise, traditions such as football or afternoon tea, which have become internationally recognized symbols, act as connecting threads between history and everyday life (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2021; Tranter & Donoghue, 2021; Wraight & Green, 2024).

It is known that the British Empire was a powerful empire, consisting of four island states and all their colonies. The largest part of its territory was made up of England, while the rest consists of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. E. Barker wrote in the preface to his book:

Britain and the British People that The British Empire or the United Kingdom of Great Britain is Britain. I ask readers to take into account when reading that by 'Britain and the British people' I mean all the Britons whose names appear on the banknotes in Latin script and whose king is George IV. To describe one Britain in isolation from another is to describe it incompletely. For the meaning of Britain in the world is that it is not alone, but it is the only one in this multitude. Therefore, here is depicted a framework that represents all the Britons who speak the language of Shakespeare and who have the beliefs and morals of Milton (Barker, 1945).

The great representative of 7th-century Anglo-Saxon literature, the church monarch Bede the Venerable (lat. Beda Venerabilis), wrote about the historical past of the English people in his work "The Ecclesiastical History of the English People" (Latin: Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum). It is no coincidence that he was called the "father of English history." The work was written in Latin, consists of five volumes, and each volume consists of several chapters. It reflects the history of the English people from ancient times to approximately 731. For the first time in this source, Bede showed the synonymity of the words "Britain" and "England." The work is a perfect historical chronicle that extensively describes the geography of the British territory, the identity of the Celtic, Angle, and Saxon tribes that settled there, the reasons for their migration, the path of struggle, the wars of existence, their literary and cultural heritage, customs and traditions, and even the bloody battles that occurred between them from time to time. The Chronicle is a valuable reference source for clarifying the issues of self-awareness of the peoples living in Britain. This work by His Majesty Bede has retained its relevance even in the 20th century, becoming an invaluable example as the main reference source for scientific works dedicated to the study of the history of self-awareness of the British peoples.

Despite the fact that Britain was formed from a union of four states, until the beginning of the 18th century, sources did not refer to it as a single state, but as four different states and peoples who sometimes even fought with each other. Since 1707, after the foundation of the state of Great Britain, the word "Britons" appeared. The word "Briton" took its origin from "Britts." Although the citizens of this state are conventionally called "Britons," each nation is distinguished by its own characteristic features, and the concept of "typical British character" cannot be applied to the people of Britain, because each nation has its own temperament, characteristic features, and unique characteristics. They themselves express more accurate and correct opinions about these characteristics.

For example, the English like to present themselves as very patient, restrained, and intelligent people with common sense. However, the Scots, Irish, and Welsh, who are followers of the Celts, say that they are very easily angered, crazy, romantic, and impulsive people. The Celts, who think somewhat differently about the English, describe them as arrogant and cold-blooded, and themselves as the bearers of all good deeds (Ashe, 2011). These peoples, who have stood the test of centuries, have not only formed the ethnic basis of the modern British Empire but have also managed to preserve their national character, culture, and traditions in their collective memory to this

day. Their attachment to traditions is reflected in examples of literature and art, in the celebration of socio-political events, in their daily lives, and even in sports competitions and contests. The main factors that distinguish the British from other peoples are not only the diversity of their ethnic origins but also the factors of language and religion.

There are reasons why the religious factor has left such a deep mark on English self-awareness. Unlike other subjects belonging to the Christian religion, the English have their own churches and denominations. These are the Anglican Church and "Anglicanism." The Anglican Church is the place of worship of the English people and belongs to them. Svetlana Lurie wrote in her article "Nationalism, ethnos, culture": "English national self-awareness has a special history. In the Middle Ages, that is, in the 15th-16th centuries, 'Empire,' 'people,' 'society,' 'Anglican Church' could be considered synonymous words. At that time, nationalism had a very strict religious character" (McEachern, 2003, p. 312). In 1559, the Bishop of London, Jean Aylmer, declared that God was English and told all his countrymen to thank God seven times a day for having made them English, not French, German, or Italian. John Foxe, in his book "The Book of Martyrs," writes that "to be English is to be a true Christian. The English people are specially 'chosen' by God from among other peoples. The power and glory of England are necessary for the rule of God" (Greenfeld, 1992, pp. 60–61). Thus, in English self-consciousness, the words "dominion" and "empire" were as much political as they were religious, and they remained relevant until the second half of the 19th century. In English national self-consciousness, "Christianity" contained more nationalism, and these nationalist feelings were based more on religious grounds than on the ethnic origin of the people.

The collapse of the great empire, the political awakening of the colonial states under its control, and the economic crisis of the monarchy left their traces in the fields of socio-political science and literature. Issues such as the nation's self-awareness, genetic codes, national identity, and national belonging became the object of socio-political debate and discussion. This complex process was called "post-imperial syndrome," "post-imperial identification crisis," and "post-imperial identification searches" in the scientific literature. In one of the publications from the "Peoples of Europe" series, in the chapter "The Great Depression" of Geoffrey Elton's book "The English," the author writes that "The English experienced the most severe and traumatic change when they became Britons. Of course, the English represented the largest part of this amalgam. They continued to exist as a people. But in all spheres of life and activity, the English were completely absorbed into the larger British society. Since they were numerically superior, they were the leaders and the center of power remained in Westminster. The world, almost as if the new name for these people who came from within the island to rule everywhere, gave the impression that the rule of the English was over" (Elton, 1992, p. 228).

At that time, two major trends became the main leading forces in the British socio-political and literary environment. The first were the "conservatives," who remained loyal to the traditions of national history and culture, and the other were the "revisionists." The revisionists criticized the Anglocentric approach. The conservatives, who stood guard over British culture and national history, devoted their creativity to two major issues: empire and post-imperialism, colonialism and post-colonialism. In other words, they focused on the concepts of "Britishness"—that is, the identity of the British people—and "Englishness"—English identity—which were of great importance in the issue of national self-awareness.

In general, the collapse of the empire in the 20th century led to a somewhat deeper national identity crisis, and the artistic reflection of this topic began to revive in modern English literature. Research in the postcolonial period finds its reflection in the comparison of the concepts of "Englishness" and "Britishness" regarding national behavior and thinking against the background of English national traditions. In the second half of the 20th century, after the collapse of the British Empire, the crisis of national self-awareness manifested itself very clearly. The main task of the research was to determine the differences between the concepts of "Englishness" and "Britishness," to reveal the similarities and differences between British nationalism and English nationalism.

During this period, a number of works glorifying English nationalism were produced. Some authors, going beyond the existing rules, revealed their subjective opinions and presented studies that gave a more vivid description of the traditions of English nationalism. David Gervais, in his work "Literary England: Versions of Englishness in Modern Writing," talked extensively about the authors who stood guard over English nationalism, devoting a separate chapter to each of them. These writers were Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas, Henry Newbolt, Rudyard Kipling, Edward Morgan Forster, David Herbert Lawrence, George Orwell, Geoffrey Hill, and others. Another researcher, R. Ebbatson, in his work "An Imaginary England: Nation, Landscape and Literature, 1840-1920," also examines the approach to the concept of Englishness in the works of English writers such as David Lawrence, Rupert Brooke, Edward Thomas, and

the Tennyson brothers, and concludes with an extensive analysis of the novel "England, My England."

At some point in time, the term "England" became so widely used that it almost replaced the concept of Britain and was applied to the entire territory. Since the 1990s, the term "Englishness" has gradually been pushed out of the socio-political lexicon, and the term "Britishness" has been used more frequently, replacing the former term. The term "Britishness" was applied to the entire population of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, regardless of ethnicity. In the second half of the 20th century, a number of works were written that included the history and culture of many English people. A new era of national artistic thinking began in British literature, during which a number of representatives of British literature dedicated autobiographical works to the honor of their "island home and its major cities" and highlighted identity issues even more prominently. L. Colley's "The Britons: The Formation of the State, 1707-1837," G. Elton's "The English," A. Calder's "The Legend of the Blitz," D. Barnes's "To England, to England," W. Olins's "Trading with National Identity," P. Ackroyd's autobiographical novel "London" and "Albion: Sources of the English Imagination," and the works of other authors breathed new life into literature.

Literary critics, when examining the national characteristics that characterized the literary environment of that period, mainly focused on the terms "Englishness" and "Britishness". In his work "Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination", P. Ackroyd linked the concept of "Englishness" with the development of language, culture and thought. He stated that the concepts of "Englishness" and "Britishness" had different development paths. P. Ackroyd states that "Englishness arose through Anglo-Saxon evolution, and Britishness through Celtic evolution", noting that this distinction reflects their separate historical trajectories.

In his book "20th Century English Literature", the renowned English scholar Kumar addresses the topic of the English national character: "The problem of 'Englishness' was presented in vivid artistic colors in the 1970s in Mary Stewart's 'Hollow Hills' trilogy. The events in the work tell about the invasion of the Anglo-Saxon tribes into the eastern and southeastern lands of Britain in the 5th century, and shortly before that, the enslavement by the Roman Empire and the dominance of the Celts in the north and northeast." Krishan Kumar writes:

The reason for the creation of M. Stewart's trilogy stems from the growing interest of writers, poets, and playwrights in the question of 'what is Englishness?' The concept of Englishness stems from issues of both ethnic composition and lifestyle, mental values, and national identity. (Kumar, 2000, p. 578).

But what is Englishness? The term "Englishness" is associated with the national mentality of the English and includes the idiosyncratic cultural norms of England and the English people (Mischi, 2009). As can be seen, this term is a reflection of the distinctiveness and individuality of the English people, their unique characteristics. Peter Childs writes that:

the main feature of the English mentality and national self-awareness is the category of 'Englishness', which has developed throughout the nineteenth century as the most important qualitative indicator of the mental unit of measurement. It has a historical character and undergoes transformation from one epoch to another, while preserving the features that constitute its main pillar. (Childs, 2022).

Dominique Battles wrote that "Englishness was closely related to the problem of national self-awareness and was an attempt to separate English culture from the culture of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" (Battles, 2012, p. 188). Although the term Englishness emerged in the post-imperial era after the 1950s and gained relevance, it has always existed in the subconscious of the English people as a complex category that includes mental values, national character, cultural heritage, and traditions that have been formed over centuries. From time to time, existing geographical conditions, historical events, and other factors have had an impact on the development of this complex process.

Besides, one of the integral components of English national self-consciousness was the island component. The "island" mentality, formed over millennia, is closely connected with the geographical environment of England. The country's location on an island plays a decisive role in the formation of the English character. It is no coincidence that the novel about Robinson Crusoe was created here. In general, there are many examples in English literature where events take place on islands. More's "Utopia", Ballantyne's "The Coral Island", Stevenson's "Treasure Island" and many other works are set in this geography. Thus, any island is subconsciously associated with the country of its birth in the mind of the English reader.

The island factor, which plays a decisive role in the English mentality, was introduced by the English writer Charles Dickens in his 1856 work "Insularities". It is no coincidence that many researchers believe that the main components of the concept of Englishness in English literature emerged at the end of the 19th century. The term Englishness underwent a complete formation process in the Victorian era, the most brilliant period of English literature, and was

highlighted and widely illuminated precisely in the work of this valuable personality. Krishan Kumar wrote that "It was the Victorian era that had a decisive impact on the crystallization of a specific English cultural type" (Kumar, 2000, p. 580).

Kumar further noted that in the work of Charles Dickens, the features of the English national conceptosphere were fully reflected at the level of ideas, plots and characters. The evidence supporting this claim is that the main factors that make up the national conceptosphere were formed in the Victorian era and became meaningful criteria. Moreover, Dickens's work itself participated in an integral process in the formation of the national identity of the English. The impetus for this was reflected in the writer's appeal to acute social problems, including his search for solutions to overcome self-absorption in English culture (Kumar, 2000:582). Dickens, throughout almost his entire body of work, clearly highlighted the national concepts of "home", "gentleman", and "fair play", which are the main components of English identity.

The national concept is the sum of the units that make up the mentality. The sum of all these concepts forms the national environment and constitutes the national conceptosphere. Mentality and conceptosphere are not the same concept. The renowned English scholar Dominique Battles, in his article "Reconquering England for the English in Havelok the Dane", while discussing the national and cultural life of the English people, puts forward a number of concepts that characterize it. He wrote about Englishness: "This is home, freedom, personal life, a healthy way of thinking, a sense of humor, gentlemanliness, fair play, restraint, tradition and heritage" (Battles, 2012, p. 191). The researcher provided extensive explanations about each of these concepts, and gave examples from the works of D. Defoe, J.B. Priestley, G. Orwell and other prominent writers, as appropriate, related to these concepts that are integral parts of Englishness.

CONCLUSIONS

"Englishness" is a product of deep substrata of the history of the British Isles, shaped by consecutive periods—from Bede's accounts and Tudor religious nationalism through hardening into a distinct cultural ethos in Victorian England—and thus functions as both socio-historical construction and ethnic signifier. As political-historical category, it has legitimated territorial and social hierarchies and mythologized them via myths, rituals and literary fictions, while as ethnic marker it distils the spiritual values, shared memory and everyday practices—language, customs, symbols—that set the English apart from Celtic and continental others. Great literary performers such as Dickens, Arnold and Orwell both articulated and legitimated Englishness by foregrounding ideas such as "home," "fair play" and the "island mentality," which collectively form the columns of an enduring national imagination. On the other hand, "Britishness" emerged following the 1707 Union as an overarching civic identity that was designed to bring together the English, Scots, Welsh and Irish within one political framework. Its primary function has been institutional and instrumental—speaking for the state interests, imperial ambition and post-imperial unity—rather than speaking for ancient cultural or ethnic identifications. While Englishness is endlessly renegotiated in literature and in everyday life, Britishness has rather been an abstract, top-down construction, evoked most forcefully in political discourse, education policy and state symbols. The tension between these two types—One rooted in history and ethnicity, the other in institutional citizenship—continues to be a rich ground for literary and cultural critique, showing how narratives of belonging and otherness develop in response to social transformation, decolonization and current controversies around identity.

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