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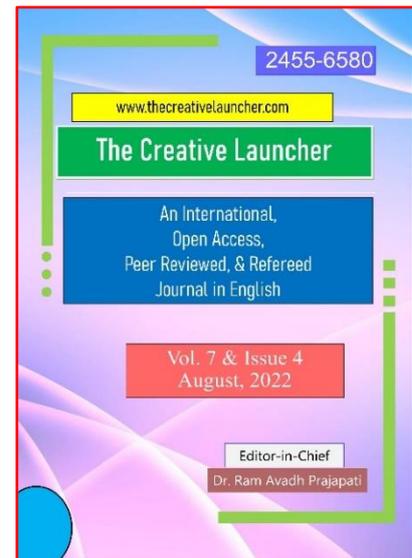
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Research Article



## Narrating Individual and Cultural Identity in Julian Barnes's *England, England*

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An Individual's loss of faith and a nation loss of faith are not they much the same.

(Julian Barnes *England, England*)

### Abstract

The conception of culture and identity has seen variations with the passage of time. Postmodern writers and thinkers do not consider them fixed or stable entities but fluid and fragmented. In the past they were treated as centered and fixed but in present conflicting

scenario they are supposed to be decentered and deconstructed. In postmodern world, when each and everything is tinted with the effect of science and technology, contemporary generation is imbibing a new spirit of materialism. The more they are developing with the help of technology the less they are finding solution and satisfaction. Advancement of science and technology has coloured each and every object of contemporary era and projected them as mere objects of marketisation. This comodification and marketisation of objects has reached to such level that everything has lost its original meaning and value. It becomes obvious that culture and identity are not untouched by this effect. The more we are advancing towards technological development the more we are losing the original ground of ancient meaning and value. Julian Barnes entertains and mocks this idea in his novel *England, England* in which Barnes's ambitious mission is search for individual identity of the English characters and cultural identity of England.

**Keywords:** Culture, Identity, Materialism, Science, Technology, Marketization, Construct, Deconstructed, Decentred, Structure

Barnes's novel *England, England* gains much critical fame and acclaim today. Divided into three parts the novel is narrated by third person narrator in omniscient perspective who has priviledged access to the inner motives and feelings of its famous characters. S/he represents each and everything whatever the characters think and feel. The life story of the female protagonist Martha Cochrane is narrated throughout the novel from her childhood to her mature age. Three parts of the novel represent three stages in her life; childhood, adolescence and old age. The protagonist tries to search out her personal identity and national culture throughout the novel. At the beginning of the novel she is trying to solve the puzzle by reordering the jigsaws but always finds one or two missing which have been hidden mischievously by her father who, taking the jigsaw in his pocket, disappeared from home never to return. Martha could never set the jigshaws in right order.

By the medium of jigsaw puzzle Barnes has successfully allegorised the identity crisis of Martha and cultural crisis of England. The lost jigsaw represents the gaps and dots in the personal identity of Martha and cultural identity of England which she always tries to reacclaim and hold. From the very beginning she tries hard to find a solid ground of identity standing upon which she can better know and feel the rich cultural dynasty of England. Identity crisis of Martha and cultural crisis of Britain run simultaneously throughout the novel. Three parts of the novel represent the past, present and future stages in the personal life of Martha and cultural history of England respectively. As the time passes furture comes to present and present turns into the past and at last everything is passed and lost, remaining only in collective memory and history. In this way it is very problematic to locate one's actual identity and glorious past and history of a nation.

In the process of her identity formation Martha heavily relies on her past memories of childhood. From the very beginning she is conscious of fragmented and random nature of memory. She tries to locate the bits and peices of her memories in chronological order but she feels unable to identify the first one. Referring to the fragmentary and random nature of memory she states: "What is your first memory...There is always a memory just behind your first memory, and you can't quite get at it. It wasn't a solid, seizable thing, which time, in its plodding, humorous way, might decorate down the years with fanciful details." (*England, England* 03). By associating random bits of memories into a logical and coherent order one can make sense of one's identity, "A memory now of a memory a bit earlier of a memory before that of a memory way back when" (04).

Martha feels so attatched with the counties that she sees her personal identity merged into the national identity of England: "Staffordshire had been found, and her jigshaw, her England, and her heart had been made whole again" (06). Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998) highlights and celebrates the value and sense of English national identity by reinnovating the myths and rich cultural history of England. Barnes has meticulously portrayed the real identity of England with the help of fictional Theme Park which encapsulates the images, icons, symbols and myths of England. It treats England as commodity or product served for market sale for world tourists. Due to the commodification and marketisation of myth and history of England, Englishness becomes an empty illusion rather than real identity in the imaginary mirror of Theme Park. In an interview to Andrew Marr Barnes himself asserted that the book is about "The idea of England, authenticity the search for truth, the invention of tradition, and the way in which we forget our own history" (Marr 15 ).

Evaluating the statement of Barnes one can sense the idea that the protagonist Sir Jack Pitman tries to reinvent and revitalise the glorious past and history of England in new flavour. He wants to serve a very bright image of rich cultural dynasty of England before the world tourists. Glorifying the image of nation he claims that "Britain had held dominion over great tracts of the world surface, painted it pink from pole to pole. We have the finest army in the world, goes without saying, but nowadays we lease it for small wars approved by others. We are no longer mega. (38,39). It seems that Sir Jack is sunk in utter frustration for losing the glorious dignity of his nation, "This is the third millennium and your tits have dropped baby" (38). To provide a very bright image of England in the eyes of world tourists he hypothesizes English history in over-dignified terms:

But what we do have, what we shall always have is what others don't. We are already what others may hope to become. This is not self-pity, this is the strength of our position, our glory, our product placement. We are the new pioneers. We must sell our past to other nations as their future. (39-40)

The second part of the novel is the longest of the three which deals with simmlarities and contradictions between real and replica, simulation and original. The protagonist Sir Jack Pitman aspires to construct a hilarious and grotesque make-believe world 'Isle of Wight' to

commemorate glorious history and rich cultural dynasty of English Empire. To make his visionary project successful, Sir Jack appoints a committee to conduct a worldwide survey which can identify the top fifty quintessences of England and Englishness. The worldwide survey identifies “England’s best known historical buildings, sites and figures” (*The Fiction of Julian Barnes*. 104). The items and figures are categorised to suit and replicate the sense and taste of Englishness for the “citizens of the world” (83). The result of the survey lists the fifty top quintessences as follows:

1. Royal Family
2. Big Ben/House of Parliament
3. Manchester United Football Club
4. Class System
5. Pubs
6. A Robin in the Snow
7. Robin Hood and his Merrie Men
8. Cricket
9. White Cliffs of Dover
10. Imperialism
11. Union Jack
12. Snobbery
13. God Save the King/Queen
14. BBC
15. West End
16. Times Newspaper
17. Shakespeare
18. Thatched Cottage
19. Cup of Tea/Devonshire Cream Tea
20. Stonehenge
21. Phlegm/Stiff Upper Lip
22. Sopping.
23. Marmalade
24. Beefeaters/Tower of London
25. London Taxis
26. Bowler Hat
27. TV Classic Serials
28. Oxford/Cambridge
29. Harrods
30. Double-Decker Buses/Red Buses
31. Hypocrisy
32. Gardening
33. Perfidy/Untrustworthiness
34. Half-Timbering
35. Homosexuality
36. Alice in Wonderland
37. Winston Churchill
38. Marks and Spencer
39. Battle of Britain
40. Francis Drake
41. Trooping the Colour
42. Whingering
43. Queen Victoria
44. Breakfast
45. Beer/Warm Beer
46. Emotional Frigidity
47. Wembley Stadium
48. Flagellation/Public Schools
49. Not Washing/Bad Underwear
50. Magna Carta (83-85).

The list is analysed thoroughly by the advisory committee in which there are various experts as Dr. Max; a historian and writer for the Times, Paul Harrison; idea’s catcher, Martha Cochrane; an appointed cynic and Jez Harris; a storyteller of fiction. The committee discusses in detail and decides what and how the items are to be simulated and commodified for the market sale to suit the taste and temperament of global tourists. Apart from this, famous historical and legendary figures are impersonated by the paid actors who rehearse twice a day to be competent enough to mime the attitude and behaviour of legends so that they can satisfy the traditional tastes and present demands of the global tourists. Sir Jack and his team aspires to provide the traditional taste and flavour of Englishness of British Citizens and their reciprocal attitudes towards the common people of the world. The figures impersonated are – Sir Francis Drake. Dr. Samuel Johnson, Connie Chatterley, Nell Gwynn and Lady Godiva. The paid actors are so immersed in their roles that they start behaving like the real icons. It becomes problematic for them to come out of their fictive identity and the result is that simulation starts replacing the real identity. This mix up of identities runs so far that Sir Jack and his team called for the actual King to present himself on the Theme Park but that also creates humour rather than a fine English experience. The actor of Dr. Johnson is so immersed in the identity that he starts acting and behaving like real Dr. Johnson. He starts making ugly comments regarding the origin and ethnicity of world tourists. The King starts chasing the women before the public and royal laviciousness is open before the tourists. A series of complaints are filed against Dr.

Johnson and the King. Impersonating the historical figures proves to be failure. The ultimate motto of Sir Jack is to provide the sense and mood of “Domestic? Europe?” and to reap “Top Daller. Long yen”. In utter enthusiasm Sir Jack proclaims that “We are offering the thing itself” (59).

Seeing the ultimate project of Sir Jack one can sense that Sir Jack is trying to show himself as a true patriot by renovating the images, figures and icons of old England. The result is that England, England entertains more and more success while the mainland suffers a vertiginous decline. Sir Jack’s ambition jumps so high that he tries to simulate all the fifty items on the Isle of Wight: “an area of twenty three miles in length, thirteen across at its widest point. One hundred and fifty five square miles” (73). On being asked why he chose the Isle of Wight Barnes seriously replied that it was one of the first places in Great Britain to be perverted by becoming a tourist destination. The Theme Park becomes so striking that “It is less a choreographed model of England than an assembly of working cultural motifs whose relationship to each other is assumed to be predictable (Bradford 94).

Barnes’s *England, England* highlights the invention of a national narrative of its identity which rejects the traditional notions of nation-state in Britain. It seems to satirise the artful construction of Englishness. It also satirises the simulated identity of England in which original traits and tastes of Old England are not projected in real hue and colour but caricatured to suit the money-making project of Sir Jack. It is advertised that the tourists need not roam all over England but they have to visit only one place where they can have a fine English experience of each and everything for which England is known for. It will prove to be time saving, money saving and above all energy saving for the visitors.

The novel is all about blurring the borders between real and hyperreal, simulation and original. Jean Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreal and simulation is quite applicable to the novel. According to Baudrillard the postmodern advanced societies are operating in an age of simulacra and simulation wherein “distinguishing between real and artificial is no longer possible as they become alike and there is no criterion to judge or decide on them”. (Baudrillard 347). He claims that hyperreality is artificial form of reality in which human world is so trapped that it has started believing and accepting the artificial as real. He argues that postmodern world is operating not in reality but in virtual reality.

The above condition happens, in the same way, with England, England in which no visitor or tourist has the first hand experience of the things and figures they have visited, but they all have been roaming among the virtual signs and images of the originals. England England is the simulation of Old England not the actual England. National identity of England is not actual but fictional. Barnes seems to highlight the victory of simulation over real and his serious concern is about the danger of the loss of the real; “The British are good at tradition: they are also good at the invention of tradition”. (Barnes, Letters from London: 27). Sir Jack justifies his idea of simulation in striking way:

The nowadays we prefer the replica to the original. We prefer the reproduction of the work of art to the work of art itself, because it gives us the greater frisson. Now, the question to be asked is, why is it that we prefer the replica to the original? Once there was only the world, directly lived. Now there is the representation of the world. It is not substitute for that plain and primitive world, but an enhancement and enrichment, an ironization and summation of that world. This is where we live today. A Monochrome world has become Technicolor, a single croaking speaker has become wraparound sound. Is this our loss? No, it is our conquest, our victory.” (55)

Barnes seems to justify the situation by claiming that in postmodern world replica is necessary because no one can find and experience the original objects but the representation of objects: “We must demand the replica since the reality, the truth, the authenticity of the replica is the one we can possess, colonize, reorder, find jouissance in, and finally, if and when we decide, it is the reality which, since it is our destiny, we may meet, confront and destroy” (55). It offers not only replica to the original but the convenient replica to the inconvenient original. Glorifying the representation of art Barnes claimed that “great works of art often transcend and replace the original story. So art can make us forget history, or forget accurate history” (Guignery 60).

While evaluating the novel it becomes obvious that national identity is a man-made construction to be adjusted to the contemporary political and social circumstances. The metanarratives of history, dignity and glory of a particular nation is constructed and modified to project before the common mass an idealised version of collective memory and common identity that binds them together under the slogan of oneness, commonality and nationalism. Their individual identities are merged into a particular common identity of nation. Inter-connections between individual and collective memory have been highlighted with greater emphasis. By comparing both of them Dr. Max states: “people remembered history in the same conceited yet evanescent fashion as they recalled their own childhood” (82).

Sir Jack and his team very carefully selects those items which can glorify the image of the English and reject those which may blot the shining image of England. Regarding this pick up Peter Childs remarks: “The focus of the items is on pre 1960 if not old England. It is England in aspic, disabled by its past, backward rather than forward looking, assembling a populist past for consumer entertainment” (Peter Childs 85).

Third part of the novel ‘Anglia’ serves as a sharp contrast to England, England. Anglia, symbol of old England, is compared to some backward province of Portugal and Turkey where “people were burdened by yesterday and the day before; a nation fatigued by its own history’ (253). In contrast to New England, ‘Anglia’ symbolises the mainland and its original and primitive cultures, values, beliefs, customs, myths and narratives. The Times of London concluded that “Old England had lost its history, and therefore-since memory is identity-had lost all sense of itself” (251).

Through the overall journey of the novel Martha's real and imaginary identity fluctuates between the past, present and future corresponding her childhood, maturity and old age respectively. In her childhood she had associated her individual identity with the cultural identities of counties of England and both of them could not be made whole. In her present age of maturity she has been working as C.E.O of Pitman Company where her relationship and behaviour with other members especially with Sir Jack and Paul results in frustration. She finds no satisfaction in her life and career. After retiring in her old age she leaves England England, and resides in Anglia where all the traditional activities are intact. It is said to be a bogus village reinventing itself into a new national identity just like Martha constructing a new identity out of her past memories and experiences. In an interview to Vanessa Guignery Barnes himself claimed that,

We create something from fragments and bits of memory, national memory, and we stick it together with a very rough glue and then once it's been there for a certain time, like a year, we think this is real, this is authentic, and then we celebrate it. It's fabrication all over again- convincing ourselves of a coherence between things that are largely true and things that are wholly imagined. (*Conversations* 63).

Regarding the identity of Martha Peter Childs has commented that, "Martha's self - image is eroded and she disposes of the jigsaw puzzle of England; she becomes uncomfortable and unsure about the story of her personal and national identity. She did not know whether she was meant to remember or to forget the past. At this rate she would never build her character"(Childs 111).

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