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History and Culture: A Critical Literature Review on Britishness

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Abstract: ***This critical literature review investigates the concept of "Britishness" from the 19th century to the present, examining its evolution and the debates that have emerged around it through the lenses of physical landscapes, historical heritage, and British literary works. It differentiates between "Britishness" and "Englishness," emphasizing the inclusive nature of the former and its imperial roots. Moreover, the review underscores the complexities involved in defining Britishness, its historical significance, and its representation in literature, all of which serve as reflections of national identity and values.***

Keywords: Britishness; Englishness; History; Landscape; Literary works.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, fueled by the burgeoning impact of post-colonial discourse, debates surrounding the idea of "Britishness" have surged into the limelight in critical circles. In general, the exploration of Britishness can be categorized into three primary domains: physical landscapes, historical heritage, and British literary works. This segment initially delves into the origins of the concept of Britishness, followed by a comprehensive analysis of prior research on Britishness through the lenses of physical landscapes, historical heritage, and British literary creations.

2. Definition and Overview of Britishness

2.1 Englishness or Britishness?

"Britishness" refers to the common national character of the British people as well as the distinctive values, beliefs, and attitudes specific to Britain (Giles, 1995). It encompasses various aspects such as national traits, religious beliefs, political forms, and historical culture, and is a crucial component of British national identity. Britishness and Englishness emphasize different aspects.

Firstly, Britishness is deeply intertwined with imperialism (Colley 1994). During the 19th century, Britishness gradually evolved into a characteristic that could be applied to distant groups scattered around the globe, including Canadians, Australians, South Americans, South Africans, New Zealanders, and New Englanders. Importantly, this identity is not exclusively confined to white populations; individuals such as Indians and Caribbean blacks also fall under its purview (Young 2007). Thus, it becomes clear that only the concept of Britishness, as understood within the context of the British Empire, can encompass British individuals of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Secondly, when considering the concept of the nation, Britishness is more inclusive than Englishness. Krishan Kumar (2010) notes that Britishness offers a less essentialized identity for non-white minorities who do not identify with the ethnicized or racialized notion of Englishness. In fact, black and Asian individuals in England are more inclined to identify as British rather than English (479). This observation indicates that the racialized nature of Englishness prompts non-white groups in the UK to psychologically align more closely with their British identity. In contrast, Englishness specifically pertains to England and can sometimes refer solely to English characteristics,

which tends to marginalize the identities of the Welsh, Irish, and Scottish (Fenton 2007).

2.2 The Definition of Britishness

The evolution of "Britishness" has garnered attention and inquiry from various sectors since the formation of Britain. The concept has deep historical roots and carries an inherent ambiguity.

"Britishness" and "Englishness" originated at different times. The term "Britishness" first emerged in the 17th century, originally referring to the people of Britain during that period. By the 19th century, it evolved to denote "the qualities or characteristics that embody being British." In contrast, "Englishness" arose in the 19th century. The term was first introduced by William Taylor of Norwich, who translated the German poet Gottfried August Bürger's ballad "Lenore." Taylor was a prominent figure in bringing German Romantic ideas into British Romantic literature (Langford 1). Marion Sherwood contends that William Taylor used the term "Englishness" for the first time in a letter to Robert Southey dated July 6, 1804, defining it as a quality or state that signifies being English or embodies English traits. This may reflect Taylor's deep immersion in German culture, which could have influenced him to coin the term "Englishness" based on German sentiments (7).

Thus, it is evident that "Britishness" initially referred to the characteristics or traits of British people, and its meaning has continually evolved and expanded throughout history.

Although the concept of Britishness has deep historical roots, its definition remains elusive. Krishan Kumar thoroughly explores this ambiguity in his work, *The Idea of Englishness: English Culture, National Identity and Social Thought* (2015). Arthur Aughey similarly asserts that the endeavor to define Britishness serves more as an epilogue than an introduction, contending that it should not be characterized as a fixed or stable entity (7). Max Weber also noted that definitions can typically only be attempted at the conclusion of a study, yet, in the case of Britishness, it appears particularly difficult to arrive at a definitive description (1). This suggests that Britishness encompasses a wide range of meanings and spans a considerable historical timeline. Therefore, this study aims to categorize the core concepts associated with Britishness.

This study endeavors to categorize the concept of Englishness through both connotative and denotative lenses. Connotatively, Englishness pertains to a specific national character, as previously noted (Langford 7). Denotatively, it can be broadly divided into two categories. First, it underscores the opposition of Englishness to the "other." Linda Colley, in her seminal work *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (1994), posits that "Englishness" constitutes an independent identity capable of coexisting with other identities, shaped through the conflicts between the British and various partially real, partially imagined "outsiders" from 1707 to 1837. In this context, England is akin to an imagined community that relies on its opposition to construct its identity. British historian Eric Hobsbawm suggests that the most effective means of uniting anxious and disparate nations is through a common external threat (quoted from Colley 1994). Consequently, during the period of 1707-1837, England forged a coherent identity by envisioning France as a loathsome adversary.

Second, Englishness plays a crucial role in consolidating self-identity and establishing self-recognition. Judy Giles, in *Writing Englishness, 1900-1950: An Introductory Sourcebook on National Identity*, asserts that Englishness transcends mere national characteristics; it serves as a nexus of values, beliefs, and attitudes distinctive to those who identify with or aspire to the British identity (13). From this perspective, Englishness can be viewed as a psychological state through which individuals affirm their identity. Kathleen Wilson aligns with Giles but places greater emphasis on the temporal dimensions of Englishness. She contends that Englishness encapsulates the defining characteristics of the English nation that distinguish it from other ethnicities at specific historical moments. As a historical construct, the cultural and political significance of Englishness is subject to continual evolution over time.

Finally, Englishness also reflects social characteristics inherent within England itself. It signifies a status that is often associated with being "white, male, southern, Protestant, and middle-class" (Mantel 96), encapsulating the racial, gender, religious, and class identities of the English populace.

Thus, it is clear that with the ascendance of nation-states and the evolution of capitalism, the representations of Englishness have grown increasingly complex, transitioning from an initial focus on national character to a broader embodiment of national identity, as well as personal, class, and gender characteristics.

3. Overview of Britishness Studies

Although Britishness is inherently challenging to define, a substantial body of academic research exists on this topic, which can be broadly categorized into three primary approaches: (1) examining Britishness through material factors such as geography, landscape, and climate; (2) exploring the formation and development of Britishness from historical and cultural perspectives; and (3) analyzing the evolution of Britishness and national identity through the lens of British literature. Given that literary works offer a systematic framework for understanding the changing connotations of Britishness and are closely related to the themes of this study, which focuses on British novels, this section will approach British novels in isolation from their broader cultural contexts for detailed examination.

3.1 Material Landscape as a Manifestation of Britishness

As an island nation, the United Kingdom is uniquely situated, with no location within its borders more than 60 miles from the sea. This distinctive geographic context has significantly influenced the development of national identity. Scholars outside the UK often explore the concept of Englishness from various perspectives related to landscape, including the island's relationship with the ocean, as well as the dynamics of rural and urban environments.

Firstly, numerous commentators examine the origins of British national identity through the lens of the island and the surrounding sea. Some argue that the geographical reality of being encircled by water has a profound effect on cultivating a sense of national identity. For instance, Katherine Wilson, in *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century*, posits that the archetype of the heroic seafarer navigating the seas encapsulates Englishness during this period. The encounters between Captain Cook and the inhabitants of distant Pacific islands significantly impacted the British public, igniting a strong sense of national identity (203). Additionally, Sebastian Sobecki, in *The Sea and Englishness in the Middle Ages: Maritime Narratives, Identity and Culture* (2011), delves into the relationship between "Englishness" and the island status, revealing medieval perceptions that linked the island's identity to the sea. He argues that the sea's fluid boundaries were a primary factor in shaping the nation's status and identity during the medieval era, with seafaring serving as a defining characteristic of English national identity and playing an essential role in medieval literature and cultural imagination. Furthermore, the overseas explorations of 18th-century Britain instilled a renewed sense of "Englishness" in its inhabitants. In contrast, other commentators contend that the island characteristics of Britain alone are insufficient to foster a robust sense of national identity among the English. For example, Krishan Kumar suggests that the identity of the empire can be traced back to the conquests of the British Isles during the medieval period. However, it is primarily within the last century that Englishness and British nationalism have gained notable attention, manifested more in cultural contexts rather than political ones.

Secondly, several scholars emphasize that the landscapes of the countryside and urban areas are also critical to the formation of national identity in Britain. These dimensions are integral to the shaping of Englishness. Julia Bennett focuses on the landscapes of industrial cities and rural settings, revealing underlying class and ethnic consciousness embedded within English identity. She asserts that the British landscape conveys shared moral values; despite social class differences, both aristocrats and commoners exhibit a common sense of identity concerning the scenery of their homeland. This affinity fosters a collective national sentiment, connecting individuals to diverse geographic areas and reinforcing their loyalty to their locales and the awareness of belonging to a community.

Among the myriad commentaries, Robert Coll's perspectives stand out concerning the relationship between land and Englishness. In *Identity of England* (2002), he emphasizes the connection between land and its people, exploring the significance of land across various historical contexts. Coll argues that during the 19th century, land was perceived as central to a "spiritual crisis," prompting a redefinition of its meaning as a space imbued with emotional significance. Another scholar, Wendy Darby, in *Landscape and Identity: British Nationality and Class Geography*, posits that the natural landscapes of England invest geographic areas with cultural meanings. She asserts that transformations within the British landscape serve to illustrate the processes underpinning contemporary national identity and class geography. Unlike Darby, who examines Englishness through the realistic portrayal of natural landscapes, some commentators focus on literary representations in English poetry. For example, Chris Thurgar-Dawson investigates the English moors in William Renton's poetic landscapes, analyzing the geographic and social discourses that reflect Englishness and the evolving cultural value of "landscape" throughout British history. He argues that the meanings attributed to the British landscape evolve over time yet consistently reflect the characteristics of Englishness.

In addition to the natural landscapes found in the countryside, researchers have also examined the development of Englishness through cultural landscapes (Stephen 2001). A particularly significant work in this field is *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past, 1880-1940* (1901). In this book, the author, adopting the perspective of a natural landscape artist, asserts that both the advocacy and criticism of artistic nationalism are fundamentally concerned with the past. The author contends that British artists, whether in favor of Brexit or remaining in the EU, are influenced by the social and aesthetic dynamics between the urban and the primordial, the modern and the traditional, as well as the rural and the urban.

Furthermore, the edited volume *Landscape and Englishness* (2000), by Robert Burden and Stephan Kohl, features scholarly contributions that explore the relationship between landscapes and Englishness across various historical periods. The central thesis of this collection is that Englishness is manifested in the spaces it occupies; whether in the nationalist theories and novels of the Victorian era or through cultural geography studies, landscapes function as spaces and places imbued with cultural significance.

In this anthology, Robert's perspective is particularly representative; he posits that landscapes evoke nostalgia and visions of childhood while suggesting that natural landscapes can mitigate the anxieties stemming from industrial economic development and provide solace in the face of wartime horrors. In contrast, Raymond Williams expresses a nostalgic appreciation for natural landscapes represented by the countryside, while simultaneously acknowledging the positive aspects of industrialism epitomized by urban environments. Addressing the prolonged revolution that Britain is undergoing—characterized by the interplay of democracy, industry, and culture—Williams advocates for the cultivation of a "common culture" that would facilitate "a more equal and democratic society as a way of life" (Milner 62).

3.2 Britishness and Historical Culture

After World War II, a wave of scholarly interest emerged in the study of historical culture and Englishness. The rise of European nationalism in the 1970s, coupled with a deepening critique of Thatcherism in the 1980s, marked a period characterized by significant social and political change. The dissolution of the British Empire, the resurgence of Scottish and Welsh nationalism, and the decline of Britain's economic dominance in favor of its European neighbors contributed to an erosion of confidence in the notions of nationhood, statehood, and future direction. Historians from this era predominantly expressed a sense of nostalgia and mourning for the fading of Englishness, articulating anxieties regarding both the present condition and the future trajectory of Britain.

Research on British history, culture, and the concept of Britishness is notably extensive, encompassing over 200 monographs and collected essays, as well as more than 1,700 journal articles. Among the notable monographs are Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, Catherine Hall's *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (2014), Wendy Webster's *Englishness and Empire, 1939-1965* (2005), Krishan Kumar's *The Idea of Englishness: English Culture, National Identity and Social Thought* (2015), and Brian Doyle's *English and Englishness* (1989).

In the realm of journal articles, Nick Bentley's "Re-writing Englishness: Imagining the Nation in Julian Barnes's *England, England* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2007) is a significant reference for the study of Britishness within the context of history and culture. A survey of the research findings regarding the development of historical culture and Britishness can be broadly categorized into the following areas:

First, gentleman culture and Britishness. Most studies examine the evolution of the nation from a male, gentlemanly perspective. For instance, Christine Berberich, in her article "The Image of the English Gentleman in Twentieth-Century Literature: Englishness and Nostalgia" (2016), analyzes how writers portray the changing concept of the gentleman in the context of complex social, cultural, and political transformations. Berberich contends that English literature places considerable emphasis on the image of the gentleman; even in texts that are not explicitly centered on gentlemen, one can identify a prevailing sense of nostalgia among the authors (31). Consequently, the English gentleman has persistently functioned as an idealized representation of Britishness in literature.

Second, popular culture and Britishness. Several scholars have examined the representation of Britishness through various lenses, including film, sports, and architecture. A notable example is the work of Kristen Gledhill and Gillian Swanson, *The Nationalization of Women* (1996), in which the authors analyze films from the World War II era and emphasize the feminization of British identity. Additionally, Tony Mason's *English Sport* (1989) and

Richard Holt's English Sport and the English (1989) explore the relationship between sports and national identity, positing that events such as the World Cup and the Olympic Games play a significant role in shaping and reinforcing national identity.

Thirdly, the study of British identity at different times, both internally in Britain and externally in relation to Britishness. A representative study of the internal development in Britain is Hilary Larkin's "Making the Englishmen: Debates on National Identity 1550-1650." This research focuses on how the English defined themselves from the late 16th century to the early 17th century. It argues that the concept of Britishness at this time was characterized as a free, simple, and non-Catholic identity, distinguishing Britain from other European countries. Linda Colley examines the period between the enactment of the Act of Union in 1707 and the official beginning of the Victorian era in 1837. She contends that during this period, a sense of national identity was formed in Britain, arising through a series of strong contrasts with its continental neighbors, particularly but not exclusively France. In contrast to Colley's view, Krishan Kumar argues that the British, as builders of the British Empire, were not exclusionary or oppositional towards foreign cultures, but rather inclusive and expansive, looking outward rather than inward. Kumar suggests that the British had a way of self-examination through the mirror of their endeavors. There is relatively little research exploring British identity from the perspective of Britain's relations with other countries, with Robert Cole's "Identity of England" being a notable exception. This study posits that Britishness was formed through the gradual union of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, asserting that the nation-based identity of Britishness is a political ideology associated with Britain and its people. Furthermore, the author focuses on key political figures in modern Britain, such as gentlemen, middle-class groups, working classes, women, and post-imperial black and Asian immigrant communities. Notably, through examining the state's attitude towards women, the author argues that women's relationship with the nation is always ambiguous; despite being granted some degree of political equality, women were still discouraged from entering the public sphere. Regardless of how the relationship between women and the nation evolves, the state remains a gendered institution.

Fourthly, literary studies and Englishness involve exploring the evolving connotations of Englishness through literary works from various periods and genres. Jed Esty argues that there exists a direct relationship between the state of literature and the state of the nation, making literary change a metaphor for national revival or decline. English culture is seen as having been shaped by a series of great "nationalist" poets, playwrights, and novelists. Their works encapsulate values and an entire way of life, articulating the aspirations of national culture in the most distinguished and authentic manner. Since the 17th century, literature has played a central role in English cultural life, long surpassing music and painting in significance. Literature, regarded as the first deity of the English nation, has been positioned on the national pedestal; it is literature—rather than Parliament or the monarchy—that serves as the most noble and heartfelt expression of the English and British people.

3.3 Britishness and British Literature

From the early 18th century onward, issues related to national identity and culture have been the subject of extensive debate in literature. The "nationalization" of literature represents a means for the English to align with the nationalism seen in other European cultures. Equally significant is the nationalization of language; Philip Dodd posits that the establishment of a "single" language is a crucial prerequisite for forming a national literary tradition, which in turn becomes the genuine "carrier" of that language.

World War I underscored the significance of English literary classics in maintaining morale and fostering patriotic pride—many soldiers carried an Oxford Book of English Verse in their packs. This phenomenon seemingly reinforced literature's role as a "superior position or carrier of national consciousness." Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams, and F. R. Leavis contend that the literary surge in England since the Victorian era can be seen as a response to the decline of religious ideology, reflecting attempts to reconstruct social order through the reimagining of social thought. Williams incorporates the novel into the sphere of English literature, asserting that it better captures the reflections and participation of non-aristocratic elite social groups in discussions of societal order.

Fourthly, the study of literature and British identity encompasses an exploration of how the connotations of British identity have evolved through literary works from various periods and genres. Jed Esty posits a direct relationship between the state of literary art and the condition of the nation; as a result, literary change serves as a metaphor for national revival or decline (1). British culture is perceived as the creation of a series of prominent "nationalist" poets, playwrights, and novelists. Their works embody core values and a way of life, articulating the aspirations of national culture in the most compelling and distinctive ways (Baldick 1983: 18-85). Since the 17th century, literature has occupied a central position in British cultural life, having long eclipsed music and painting. Literature

is regarded as the foundational spirit of the British nation, elevated upon a national pedestal; it is literature—rather than Parliament or the monarchy—that represents the most profound and heartfelt expression of the English and British people.

From the early 18th century onward, the themes of national identity and culture have been extensively debated in literary discourse. The "nationalization" of literature represents an attempt by the British to catch up with the nationalism reflected in other European cultures (Krishan, 2003). Equally significant is the nationalization of language; Philip Dodd argues that the establishment of a "single" language is a necessary prerequisite for the formation of a national literary tradition, which subsequently becomes the true "bearer" of that language (1986). World War I highlighted the crucial role of classical British literature in maintaining morale and instilling patriotic pride—many soldiers carried an Oxford Book of English Verse in their backpacks (Brooker and Widowson 1986: 120–1). This underscores literature's role as a "superior locus or bearer of national consciousness" (Collini 1993: 364). Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams, F. R. Leavis, and others contend that the literature emerging in Britain since the Victorian era serves as an alternative product in the wake of declining religious ideology; it reflects an endeavor to reconstruct social order by revitalizing social thought (quoted in Wang Jian 50). Williams includes the novel within the realm of British literature, asserting that it more effectively embodies the reflections and engagement of non-aristocratic social groups in discussions of social order.

Clearly, British literature plays a pivotal role in shaping British identity. Given the significance and depth of research in this field, it is imperative to systematically review the literature exploring British identity from the perspective of British novels. While the first peak of English literature occurred during the Renaissance, notably dominated by drama (Margaret Tudeau-Clayon, 8), the novel has emerged since the 18th century as a crucial medium for articulating profound thoughts and national identities. Scholars increasingly acknowledge the vital function of literary works in disseminating national images, memories, and myths (Parrinder, 2008). Therefore, it is essential to provide an independent synthesis of literary criticism, particularly focusing on the relationship between the novel and British identity.

From the initial emergence during the Renaissance to the flourishing development in the 18th and 19th centuries, culminating in the diverse explorations of the 20th century, this theme showcases a rich and evolving academic landscape. Although the concept of "Britishness" as a distinct notion only took shape in the 19th century, Renaissance literature, such as Shakespeare's plays, hints at early explorations of national identity. While contemporary scholarship has greatly benefited from nuanced interpretations of canonical texts from this period, it often remains overly concentrated on the texts themselves, neglecting a comprehensive examination of the social and cultural contexts in which these works were produced. Moreover, when attempting to trace the modern concept of "Britishness" back to the Renaissance, caution is warranted to avoid over-interpretation or the imposition of contemporary theoretical frameworks onto historical contexts.

Catherine Wilson's work, *Islands of Race: Britishness, Empire, and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (2003), critically examines the relationship between female identity and Britishness, revealing the complexities of women's roles within imperial and nationalist discourses. Wilson's research offers significant insights into understanding Britishness in the 18th century, yet it may insufficiently attend to the dynamics of male identity in the construction of Britishness. Additionally, while analyses of the relationship between imperial expansion and Britishness are incisive, they may fail to capture the historical intricacies, such as the multifaceted motivations behind imperial expansion and its impact on diverse communities.

Regarding the exploration of Britishness in 19th-century British novels, three major aspects can be identified. First, national identity and Britishness: Patrick Parrinder's *Nation and Novel* meticulously analyzes the connections between national identity and Britishness in early 19th-century novels. Despite Parrinder's insightful analysis, it may not adequately consider the diversity and dynamism inherent in the processes of national identity construction. Second, empire and Britishness: Sue Thomas's work on *Jane Eyre*, focusing on imperialism, reform, and Britishness (2008), elucidates the intrinsic associations between concepts such as imperialism, slavery, and race with Britishness. While Thomas's research emphasizes the close ties between empire and Britishness in *Jane Eyre*, it might not fully explore the identity variations and conflicts among different groups within the empire. Third, animals and Britishness: Kurt Koning's *Novels and Zoos: Holism, Britishness, and Empire* (1900) offers new perspectives by analyzing the representations of animals as symbols of imperial power in literature. Nonetheless, Koning's approach, which views animals primarily as singular symbols of imperial authority, may oversimplify the complexities of historical and cultural phenomena.

In conclusion, while significant strides have been made in the realm of external literary studies and Britishness, challenges persist, including the reliance on singular research perspectives, limited theoretical frameworks, and oversimplifications of historical contexts. To advance this field, there is a pressing need for more diverse and inclusive research methodologies that thoroughly examine the interrelations between literary works and various historical, social, and cultural dimensions. Future inquiries should continue to explore emerging literary phenomena, such as postcolonial and immigrant literatures, in relation to Britishness, while considering the transformations and evolutions of Britishness across different historical periods and cultural contexts. In the context of globalization and cross-cultural exchanges, a broader perspective is required to reevaluate Britishness and its literary manifestations, thereby fostering ongoing innovation and development in this field of study.

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