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THE TRANSFORMATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN POSTCOLONIAL BRITISH LITERATURE

Ilaha Gulyeva Nuraddin,

*PhD in Philology, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Languages,
Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan
(Baku, Azerbaijan)*
ORCID ID: 0009-0004-0833-6147

Abstract. The article examines the transformation of the concepts of national identity and cultural memory in British literature during the postcolonial period. Beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, alongside the collapse of the British Empire, the notion of *Britishness* began to be redefined. The inclusion of diverse ethnic and cultural groups within the literary space transformed national identity into a more multifaceted, dynamic, and memory-based construct. The study offers a comparative analysis of postcolonial theories (E. Said, S. Hall, H. Bhabha) and the role of folklore and collective memory in the preservation of national identity (M. Kazimoglu-Imanov, B. Anderson). Analyses of the works of writers such as Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, and Zadie Smith reveal that postcolonial British literature presents national identity not as a fixed category, but as a dynamic process reconstructed through memory, language, and cultural experience.

Key words: postcolonialism, national identity, cultural memory, British literature, collective consciousness, cultural transformation, folklore.

Introduction. The problem of national identity in British literature has been closely intertwined with ideological, political, and cultural transformations at different historical stages. In the nineteenth century, the concept of *Britishness* was constructed as a symbol of imperial power and cultural superiority. However, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, this notion acquired a multicultural and hybrid character in the postcolonial context. With the dissolution of the Empire, British literature shifted its focus from the center to the periphery – to the voices of the colonies, their collective memories, and historical experiences. New literary tendencies emerging in the postcolonial era present the concepts of cultural memory and national identity as mutually interactive. In this literature, identity is no longer perceived as fixed and homogeneous, but as a multilayered, fluid, and dynamic process shaped by the recollections of the past. The role of cultural memory in preserving national identity can be compared to that of folklore. As M. Kazimoglu-Imanov notes, “*oral literature created in the native language of a people is the most significant indicator of national identity and serves as the carrier of collective consciousness*” (Kazimoglu-Imanov, 2019, p. 5). This approach demonstrates that language, memory, and tradition constitute the foundation of a nation’s self-awareness.

A similar tendency can be observed in British literature. In works such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, V. S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*, and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, issues of memory, cultural trauma, and identity are depicted as elements of a complex cultural system where diverse ethnic experiences intersect. As Gunay Nadirova remarks, “*British postcolonial literature reflects the interdependence between the center and the periphery of the Empire, as well as the mutual transfer of cultural codes*” (Nadirova, 2019, p. 42).

The purpose of this article is to analyze the interrelation between national identity and cultural memory in British literature during the postcolonial period, and to demonstrate how these two concepts are transformed within literary discourse.

Discussion. The research is grounded both in postcolonial theory (Said, 1978; Hall, 1996; Bhabha, 1994) and in theoretical approaches to folklore and collective consciousness (Kazimoglu-Imanov, 2019). These frameworks allow national identity to be interpreted not merely as a historical or political category, but as a spiritual system continuously reconstructed through cultural memory.

Folklore and Cultural Memory: A Mechanism of National Identity Formation

National identity is the primary indicator of a people's self-awareness and its ability to preserve historical and spiritual existence. This identity is shaped not only by political or geographical boundaries but also by cultural memory and collective thought. Among the strongest carriers of cultural memory is folklore, which transmits a people's historical experience, value system, worldview, and linguistic consciousness from generation to generation. According to M. Kazimoglu-Imanov, "the most evident indicator of national identity in folklore is the native language; since oral literature created in one's own language and transmitted across generations is the most vivid expression of national consciousness" (Kazimoglu-Imanov, 2019, p. 5). This observation reveals that language is not merely a medium of communication but also a fundamental pillar of cultural memory. Consequently, folklore and literature share an intrinsic connection through their memory systems: both preserve a nation's identity by means of symbolic images, myths, and archetypes. Jan Assmann was among the first scholars to systematically conceptualize cultural memory. In his view, cultural memory is built upon symbols, ritual forms, and memorable texts that ensure the continuity of collective identity (Assmann, 1992, p. 39). Thus, the function of folklore is not only to preserve the past but also to transmit it into the present consciousness – making it a dynamic and transformative mechanism rather than a static repository.

In the British literary tradition, the interaction between folklore as a form of memory and literature as a medium of expression is equally evident. Since the twentieth century, symbols of the past, folk beliefs, and cultural codes have become essential instruments in the reconstruction of national identity. As B. Anderson notes, "*the nation is an imagined community; its unity is sustained not by real boundaries but by shared memories and collective imaginations*" (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). In this sense, folklore serves as the core memory resource of this "imagined community."

Ultimately, folklore functions both as a guardian of historical continuity and as an active cultural mechanism for the reformation of national identity. It idealizes the past to stabilize collective memory while simultaneously generating new meanings within modern literature, thereby contributing to the transformation of identity.

Reconstructing British Identity in the Post-Imperial Era

The collapse of the British Empire led not only to the disintegration of political and economic structures but also to the destabilization of the spiritual foundations of British identity. For centuries, *Britishness* represented the unifying force, values, and cultural superiority of the Empire. However, decolonization, migration, and the emergence of a multicultural society fundamentally altered this notion. "Being British" was no longer defined by a single culture, religion, or ethnicity; instead, it became a hybrid space where multiple identities intersected and interacted. As Nadirova observes, "*in the postcolonial period, British literature eliminates the boundaries between the center and the periphery of the Empire and represents identity not as a unified whole but as a process of interaction and exchange*" (Nadirova, 2019, p. 44). Thus, in the post-imperial context, identity is perceived as an evolving "process" – not a fixed category, but a product of ongoing social, cultural, and psychological interactions. This transformation is vividly reflected in the works of Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith, and Andrea Levy. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie portrays the generation born at India's independence as a metaphor for the conflict between empire and colony. Identity in this novel is constructed through both personal and collective memory – a fusion of recollections, mythic images, and historical contradictions that together create a new "post-imperial self." In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith presents the everyday lives of London's multicultural communities, emphasizing the polyphonic and fluid nature of identity. Her characters cannot define themselves through a single belonging; they inhabit a space shaped by both the colonial past and contemporary urban reality. This generates a new sense of belonging – fragmented yet creative. Stuart Hall reinforces this idea, stating that "*national identity is no longer a fixed or unified structure but the outcome of continuous*

negotiation between past and present" (Hall, 1996, p. 613). Hence, British identity no longer embodies imperial triumph but rather reflects a newly emerging moral space shaped by the convergence of multiple cultural memories.

Memory and Identity in Contemporary British Writers

In the postcolonial era, British literature evolved into a diverse map of identities voiced by writers of different origins. Through the interplay of personal and collective memory, these authors redefined national belonging. For them, "being British" is no longer the emblem of a single culture but a spiritual space where various histories, memories, and languages intersect.

Salman Rushdie stands as one of the pioneers of this tendency. In *Midnight's Children*, India's independence is symbolically portrayed as both a personal and national birth. The protagonist's memory becomes the vessel of historical experience. For Rushdie, memory is not merely recollection but a creative reconstruction – a means of rewriting and redefining identity. As he asserts, "*for the post-colonial subject, identity is a continuous dialogue between past and present*" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 211).

In V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, the remnants of the past manifest as individual solitude amid a disintegrated culture. Naipaul's characters, displaced within the post-imperial world, embody the sense of *unbelonging* – they fit neither the imperial nor the national frameworks, symbolizing the psychological fragmentation and rootlessness of postcolonial existence. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* offers a more polyphonic and ironic exploration of memory. Through the lives of immigrant families in London, Smith demonstrates how each generation constructs identity differently: the first clings to the past, the second strives to escape it, while the third remains trapped between the two. Her language is vibrant and multilayered, capturing the fluidity of identity. As she writes, "*you cannot escape the past, because it lives in your voice, your behavior, your thoughts*" (Smith, 2000, p. 389). Andrea Levy's *Small Island* continues this dialogue, portraying Jamaican immigrants arriving in post-World War II Britain. For her characters, London embodies both hope and disillusionment – a city of belonging and alienation. Through their stories, Levy reveals the contradictions of "Britishness" as a multicultural reality. In these works, memory functions not only as an individual experience but also as the repository of historical and cultural traces. For these writers, memory preserves the past while simultaneously shaping the future of identity. As Homi Bhabha argues, "*identity is never complete; it is always in the process of becoming*" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). Thus, in contemporary British literature, identity emerges as an ever-evolving construct – reborn in every generation and refracted through multiple memories.

Conclusion. In the postcolonial period, British literature introduced a new perspective on national identity. Whereas during the imperial era *Britishness* symbolized cultural dominance and authority, in the modern context it has transformed into a multilayered, dynamic, and memory-oriented process. In the works of diverse authors, national identity appears not as uniform or stable, but as a space of encounter where different languages, memories, beliefs, and life experiences converge. Folklore and collective memory play central roles in this transformation. Cultural memory not only preserves a people's historical experience but also reinterprets it, thereby enabling the continual evolution of national identity. As Kazimoglu-Imanov emphasizes, language and memory constitute the essential pillars of identity, serving as the most enduring means of preserving a nation's spiritual existence (Kazimoglu-Imanov, 2019, p. 6). In British literature, the interrelation between memory and identity is explored on both individual and collective levels. For Rushdie, Naipaul, Smith, and Levy, memory is not merely an act of remembrance but a form of reckoning – a creative act through which new identities are forged. Through their protagonists, readers come to understand that for the postcolonial subject, identity is not a "finished self" but an ongoing process of formation.

Ultimately, postcolonial British literature presents national identity not as the product of a single culture, but as a dynamic phenomenon emerging from the dialogue of multiple cultural memories. This literature builds a bridge between the legacy of the past and the realities of the present – not

by rejecting the past, but by reinterpreting it. Hence, national identity is simultaneously preserved through memory and renewed through cultural interaction. In this sense, British identity in contemporary literature belongs neither to one history nor to one nation, but exists as an open cultural space where diverse memories intersect and reshape one another.

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