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# THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH ENGLISH LITERATURE: A HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Preeti<sup>1\*</sup>, Amutha A<sup>2</sup>, Chaitra N S Murthy<sup>3</sup>, Anam Khan<sup>4</sup>, Ashok Kumar Upadhyay<sup>5</sup>,  
Ankur Tiwari<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English Galgotias University.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6153-9022>, Email: [preetiroy25648@gmail.com](mailto:preetiroy25648@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation, Vaddeswaram, Andhra Pradesh.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0074-5294>, Email: [amuthalosh@gmail.com](mailto:amuthalosh@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dayananda Sagar Business Academy, Bangalore University.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6101-4033>, Email: [chaitransm@gmail.com](mailto:chaitransm@gmail.com)

<sup>4</sup>Academic Associate, Department of Communications, Indian Institute of Management, Indore.

Email: [khananam188@gmail.com](mailto:khananam188@gmail.com)

<sup>5</sup>Department of Library and Information Science, Mangalayatan University, Aligarh-202146, Uttar Pradesh, India. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1859-675X>, Email: [ashoka143@gmail.com](mailto:ashoka143@gmail.com)

<sup>6</sup>Research Scholar, Banaras Hindu University.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9169-804X>, Email: [tankur144@gmail.com](mailto:tankur144@gmail.com)

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Corresponding author: Preeti

([preetiroy25648@gmail.com](mailto:preetiroy25648@gmail.com))

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how English literature has historically shaped national and cultural identity, tracing the evolution of identity narratives from early English writing to contemporary multicultural texts. It integrates literary history with theoretical perspectives on nationalism, cultural memory, and representation to provide a comprehensive account of literature's role in constructing collective belonging. The research employs a qualitative, interpretive literary methodology combining thematic reading, historical contextualization, and cross-period comparison. Representative texts from major literary periods were examined to identify recurrent identity motifs, contextual dynamics, and shifts in narrative strategies influencing national and cultural self-understanding. The analysis reveals persistent themes of communal belonging, political legitimacy, and cultural memory in earlier periods, followed by increasing fragmentation, hybridity, and negotiation in modernist, postcolonial, and contemporary writing. Literature emerges as a dynamic site where dominant national narratives are reinforced through myth-making and symbolic geography, yet also challenged through counter-narratives that foreground displacement, marginality, and transnational identity. Comparative results highlight the transition from unified national imaginaries to plural, contested, and globally inflected forms of belonging. By synthesizing historical literary analysis with theoretical models of identity, the study provides an integrated framework for understanding how English literature produces, transmits, and reconfigures cultural identity across time. It demonstrates literature's influential role in mediating cultural memory, negotiating power, and shaping evolving conceptions of nationhood in an interconnected world.

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**KEYWORDS:** Cultural Identity; English Literature; Literary Representation; National Identity; Postcolonial Narratives.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

National and cultural identity are the important structures by which people define collective belonging, collective memory, and cohesiveness. In the humanities, these constructs are not perceived as predetermined inheritance but are dynamic cultural constructions that are constructed via discourse, representation, and sociality. The English literature, an account of medieval chronicles up to the present-day multi-cultural writings, has long been one of the most effective cultural tools in creating and disseminating notions of nationhood, heritage, and cultural values. As Semiyeva (2025) says, literary works serve as mirrors of culture, being both reflections and constructions of the cultures of their societies. Likewise, Niu (2025) points out that the English language tends to transform into a philosophical arena in which the issue of nationalism, multiculturalism, or cultural identity is being debated. Although there has been a substantial body of work in the social sciences on the topic of nationalism and identity, there are still fewer studies that combine the historical development of the English literary realm with the current theories on identity construction. The current literature focuses on identity in separate historical eras or authors, leading to disjointed conceptualizations that lack explanations of the long-term changes (Kearney, 2018). Globalisation and cultural identity studies, including Zajda and Majhanovich (2021), indicate that there is a necessity to conduct integrative analyses that reflect how cultural identity is constantly restructured in time and settings. Similarly, the role of national narratives and how they are formed, challenged, and rebuilt in literary forms is also emphasized in postcolonial studies (Ahmad, 2023; Parker et al., 2018).

Theories have been used by scholars to address the interconnection between literature and national identity in a variety of theoretical perspectives. The initial cultural studies perceive literature as a collection of shared myths, collective memory, and ideological meaning. As an example, Turner (2020) shows the incorporation of national narratives into literary and filmic narratives to enforce the perception of belonging. Similar arguments are observed in the analysis of Skórczewski (2020) of the Polish national identity, which shows the use of literature to maintain cultural awareness under circumstances of political instability at the time, a framework that can be used to trace other instances of such a relationship in English literary history. Postcolonial and cultural studies have increasingly been used in theoretical approaches to nationhood.

The concept of a nation as a narrative produced by the discourses of ambivalence and contestatory meanings is reflected in Bhabha's (2021) idea of the so-called "DissemiNation". It is further reiterated in the rethink of Ahmad (2023) on the national allegory of Jameson, which is concerned with the ability of literature to encode struggles between dominant and peripheral identities. In the meantime, multilingualism and cultural participation literature point to the interaction, negotiation, and linguistic plurality as the constructors of identity, with Fisher et al. (2020) indicating the plurality of the theories of identity formations. These reflections are relevant to the presentation of cultural identity by Niu (2025) on the topic of modern English writing, and more specifically in the context of multicultural conditions due to migration and globalization. Cultural citizenship and social belonging are other sociocultural studies that help in understanding identity. Rodríguez (2018) demonstrates that the marginalized communities reclaim identity with the help of cultural narratives- an idea that is applicable in postcolonial and diasporic English literary works. The organization of thoughts about nationhood on a broader theoretical level, like an analysis of the post-national constellation by Habermas (2018), also indicates that the belonging of a country to a national community is becoming more of a factor shaped by global interdependence and cultural hybridity. Taken together, these pieces prove the abundance of the existing scholarship and also point to the necessity of conducting the historical-theoretical synthesis. There are three key research questions that form the basis of the analytical process of this study. To start with, it analyses the involvement of English literature in national and cultural self-constructions in the past by following the lines through which literary texts have been used to create collective belonging over time. Second, it explores the theoretical models that most describe the mode of interrelation between literary production and identity formation, relying on the views of nationalism studies, cultural memory theory, and literary discourse analysis. Third, the paper investigates the role of literature in reinforcing, negotiating, or confronting dominant national narratives with great emphasis on the changing representational tactics exercised in different eras of time. Combined, these questions intertwine historical, theoretical, and literary approaches to English literature, placing the latter as a source of cultural identity and the agent of its constant evolution. The importance of this study is the fact that it attempts to fill disciplinary gaps between cultural theory, identity studies, and literary history.

Although earlier literature offers solid grounds on cultural identity (Zajda and Majhanovich, 2021) and literary representation (Semiyeva, 2025), not many findings are made by bringing the two together within the entire domain of English literature. This article presents a comprehensive explanation of the role played by literature in building collective identity by tracing the development of identity narratives from medieval times to the present situation.

The aims of this study can be divided into four, and all of them help towards its bigger objective of coming to know the way identity is constructed in literature. To start with, the study will attempt to examine the role of English literature in developing national and cultural identities in different historical eras. Second, it uses a variety of theoretical approaches, among which are postcolonial, cultural, and narrative theories, to explain how literary texts are involved in these processes of identity making. Third, the paper will seek to discover the common themes and approaches authors have adopted to build or challenge national identity, including continuity and change over time. Lastly, it attempts to formulate a holistic model of identity formation in the English literature, as there is a necessity of having an integrated and theoretically disciplined approach in the current scholarly works. In this manner, the study contributes to academic discourse on the process of the creation, sustenance, and redefinition of cultural narratives by placing English literature as an active site of negotiation of identity on the national and global levels.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Nation and National Identity

The contemporary approach to the study of national identity is based on the understanding that nations exist as an artificial creation of cultural structure and not as natural or primordial ones. The reworking of imagined communities by Anderson shows that national belonging is created by common narratives, which allow people to make themselves feel members of a certain group, which they will never experience in real life (Anderson's, 2006). This framing makes national identity a discursive form of production that is perpetuated by cultural production.

Gellner also explains the process through his theory of cultural standardization, which suggests that nationalism is a result of the necessity to have common linguistic and cultural structures in contemporary societies (Gellner, 2015). His view on what constitutes national identity is that it is maintained by homogenization mechanisms

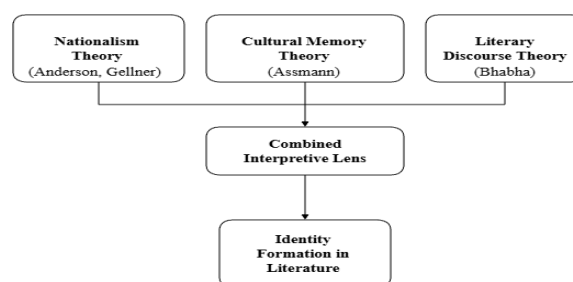
systemic in the form of education, language, and cultural institutions. Bhabha makes such models complicated by outlining the nation as a narrative space with an ambivalence and hybridity that is constantly negotiated instead of pre-determined (Bhabha, 2013). His concept of "narrating the nation" presupposes the cultural or literary mechanisms of forming national consciousness.

### 2.2. Cultural Identity and Representation

Cultural identity is now being perceived as a dynamic, relational, and a product created through representational practices. The collective memory by Assmann and Czaplicka shows the way societies maintain identity by telling culturally encoded memories, myths, and symbolic traditions (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995). The fact that they differentiate between lived memory and institutionalized cultural memory highlights the way literature and cultural texts maintain identity through the generations. In this context, the idea of representation is quite dominant in shaping cultural identity. Narratives created and received in terms of interpretive structures mirror larger cultural patterns, which hints at the idea of identity being mediated in terms of symbolic and textual modes, but not being an immanent attribute of social groups. These observations are in line with the modern literary theory, which acknowledges the impact of discourse and cultural power on identity discourses.

### 2.3. Literature as a Cultural Discourse

Literature is a sensitive tool that is used to express, reproduce, and challenge national and cultural identities. According to Herman, literary theory offers methods for the study of the functioning of systems of symbols in texts to organize meaning and cultural value (Herman, 1999).



**Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Identity Formation in Literature.**

Literature can help to construct a collective identity, either supporting mainstream ideologies or creating possibilities of alternative interpretations using narrative voice, genre conventions, and mythic structures. Bhabha (2013) notes that literature has been involved in the nation-telling process directly, and as such, it has been one of the focal points of

identity construction. Figure 1 demonstrates that the relationship between nationalism theory, cultural memory, and literary discourse is feasible since these three structures interrelate to form identity construction in English literature.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Research Approach

The study takes the qualitative, interpretive literary approach that is used to investigate the ways in which English literature constructs, negotiates, and challenges national and cultural identity at various moments in history. The interpretive method is suitable since identity development is anchored in symbolic meaning, narrative, and cultural discourse, which can only be analyzed in terms of close reading and not quantification. The analysis combines both contextualization of literature through history and interpretation of literature through text, and this enables literary works to be viewed as the works of creative individuals as well as those that are the manifestations of the cultural context in which the literary works were written. This two-fold focus guarantees that the research takes into consideration not just the inner processes of the texts but also the sociohistorical contexts in the wider sense, which preconditioned their identity formation.

#### 3.2. Data Source

The corpus is composed of the representative texts in major epochs of the English literary history, which were chosen because of their role in developing the cultural discourses and expression of the shared identity. Early English literature, such as works related to Chaucer, gives us an idea of the theories that contributed to the development of the concept of community, language, and belonging. The historical plays by Shakespeare are not left behind since they explicitly address monarchy, national mythology, and political validity. The works of romantic and Victorian literature bring insights into emotional nationalism, imperial expansion, and moral identity. Modernist works provide images of fragmentation, crisis, and the reconsideration of national narratives because of conflict in the world and cultural disillusionment. Lastly, the postcolonial and contemporary authors shed light on changing, mixed, and conflictual forms of identity because of migration, decolonization, and multiculturalism. Combined, these periods can provide a diachronic perspective of how English literature has been involved in the development of a national and cultural self-understanding.

#### 3.3. Analytical Procedure

The review will take three stages of interpretation.

In the first place, to define the ways that each text forms and challenges national and cultural identity, thematic reading is applied in terms of such motifs as belonging, memory, power, heritage, and difference. This stage is characterized by an analysis of narrative strategies, the role of characters, symbolism systems, and representational patterns. Second, both texts can be interpreted within a context, placing the thematic content of both texts within the political, cultural, and ideological contexts of their historical time. This process can be used to explain the way literature reacts and takes part in wider discourses of identity. Third, the analysis does a cross-period comparison, which follows the development of identity in literary periods. It is through this comparative aspect that we can be able to define continuities, like the way in which mythic national histories are used, but also some major transitions, such as the possibility of new hybrid or transnational identities in later times. Naturally, the combination of these approaches brings about a consistent analytical tool that could be applied to showing long-term trends in the literary construction of national and cultural identity.

### 4. RESULTS

The results that this analytical process can produce indicate continuities of the past and the changes of the English literature in its interaction with the themes of national and cultural identity. Even though all the literary periods approach the topic of identity along diverse thematic and stylistic routes, there exist several cross-period continuities along with major ideological transformations. These findings are structured into three dimensions of analysis, which include historical trajectories, narrative strategies, and counter-narratives.

#### 4.1. Historical Evolution of Identity Construction

A diachronic study reveals that English literature always addresses the concepts of belonging, collective memory, and national character. Table 1 summarizes the prevailing themes of identities, which appeared in the key literary periods covered in the data dataset.

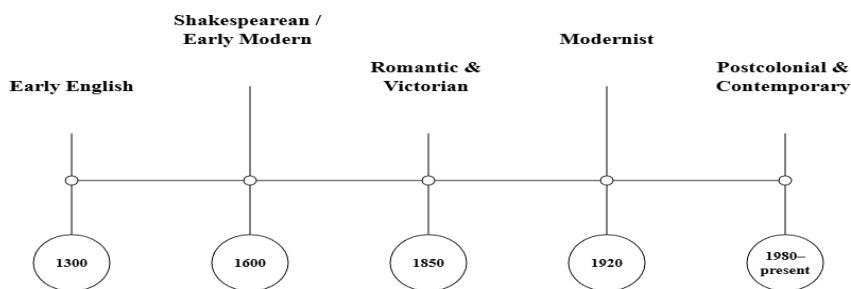
As demonstrated in Table 1, the texts of early England tended to ground identity on the moral community and the newly developed linguistic coherence. Compared to it, the Shakespearean era favors national mythology and political legitimacy as tools of collective identity. The later eras, especially the Romantic and the Victorian literature, extend the national identity to include the empire, morality, and the perceived superiority of the British nation's morality. Modernist writings disjoin such ideals, and modern writing anticipates the existence of the

diasporic, hybrid, and transnational identity. The identity construction varies markedly across all the key literary periods, starting with the communal

forms of the Early English and transitioning to the hybrid and transnational identity construction in the present-day pieces of literature, as shown in Figure 2

**Table 1: Dominant Identity Themes Across Literary Periods**

Literary Period	Central Identity Themes	Key Identity Functions
Early English	Community, linguistic unity, Christian moral order	Establishing shared cultural symbols
Shakespearean / Early Modern	Monarchy, legitimacy, national mythmaking	Consolidating national narratives
Romantic and Victorian	Emotional nationalism, social morality, imperial pride	Expanding ideological identity frameworks
Modernist	Fragmentation, disillusionment, crisis of meaning	Questioning inherited identities
Postcolonial and Contemporary	Hybridity, diaspora, cultural negotiation	Rewriting and contesting national identity



**Figure 2: Historical Timeline of Identity Construction in English Literature.**

**4.2. Narrative Strategies in Shaping Identity**

Throughout time, the use of certain narrative techniques has been used in literature to form national and cultural identity. These are symbolic sceneries, mythic buildings, shared memory signatures, and stereotypical figures that represent

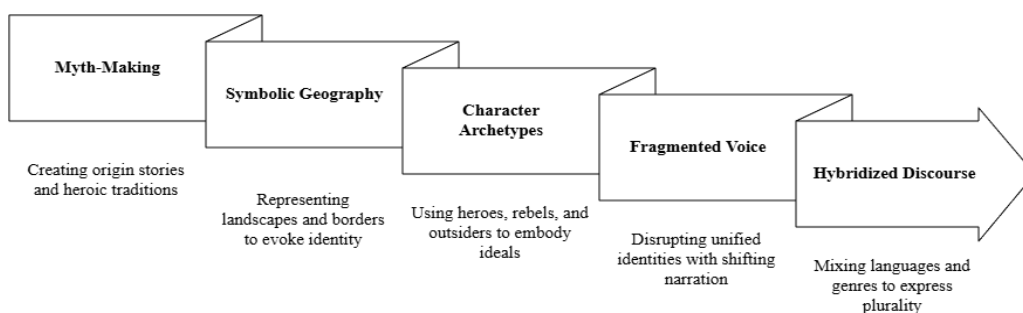
national values or fears. Through the analysis, it was found that narrative voice and focalization are very significant in the identification of ways in which the readers agree or disagree with the dominant identity narratives. The key narrative strategies identified have been described comparatively in Table 2.

**Table 2: Narrative Strategies Used to Construct or Challenge Identity**

Strategy	Description	Literary Impact
Mythmaking	Use of heroic, legendary, or foundational narratives	Solidifies national memory and shared origins
Symbolic Geography	Depiction of national spaces (landscapes, cities, borders)	Creates emotional coherence around the homeland
Character Archetypes	Heroes, rebels, outsiders, imperial figures	Models' ideals or exposes tensions in identity
Fragmented Voice	Shifting or unreliable narration	Challenges unified national narratives
Hybridized Discourse	Mixing languages, genres, and cultural registers	Expresses plural, contested identities

As Table 2 below reveals, older times are more dependent on mythic coherence and symbolic geography, whereas modern and postcolonial texts are more dependent on fragmented narration and hybrid discourse to disrupt monomethodical

structures of identity. The key narration processes according to which the identity is formed are outlined in Figure 3, which lays emphasis on the five most common strategies that occur over time.



**Figure 3: Narrative Strategies in the Construction of National and Cultural Identity.**

### 4.3. Emergence of Counter-Narratives

Among the most essential findings, there is the emergence of counter-narratives in modern and postcolonial literature. These readings oppose those figures of authority that are reinforced by previous eras, the romantic images of Britain, and the political, racial, and cultural exclusions that lie under the national myths. Counter-narratives demonstrate the

weakness of essentialist identities by anticipating experiences of colonial displacement, the struggles against racial and linguistic dominance, the incompatibility of cultural memory and historical erasure, and the struggles to belong in diasporic situations. Table 3 is a visual summary of the shift between authoritative representations and pluralistic representations.

**Table 3: Transition From Dominant Narratives to Counter-Narratives**

Identity Mode	Dominant Narratives (Earlier Periods)	Counter-Narratives (Later Periods)
Representation	Unified national voice	Multiple, conflicting identities
Power Dynamics	Centre defines the margins	Margins speak back to the centre
Cultural Memory	Homogeneous historical lineage	Memory marked by rupture and contestation
Ideology	Imperial, moral, stable	Postcolonial, critical, hybrid

Table 3 shows how fixed ideological legacy identity is turned into an identity of negotiation. The counter-narratives do not merely counter the national paradigms that have existed before, but they also reform them by providing alternative perspectives to them, depending on the multicultural and global, and diasporic realities.

In history, English literature can be regarded as one of the main arenas where the issues of national and cultural identity can be discussed. Previous literature construct's identity by empowering common narratives and legitimizing political or moral power. The modernist and postcolonial literature in the contemporary world, however, reinstates literature in a critical context where identity is challenged, shaken, and redefined. The findings confirm that identity construction in literature is dynamic and ongoing, which is based on the preexisting cultural motifs and is constantly changed based on the fluctuation of historical events. His findings together inform us about the ways in which literature has established a common identity at various periods and how these tendencies could be explicated with the help of theoretical methods, and how literary texts contribute to the re-negotiation of the national and cultural identity. This contact brings out the eternal value of literature as a civilization in its capacity to establish the way in which people interact with one another and the position they occupy in the world.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results of the current research show that English literature serves as a dynamic space where national and cultural identities are ever articulated, negotiated, and opposed. The history of identity, from early communal accounts to modern hybrid identities, suggests that identity in literary works is not a given inheritance, but a social construction made by historical circumstances, ideological anticipations, and the cultural roles that change with time. This development echoes some of the classic arguments by theorists like Anderson, who argues that nations are maintained in a continuous process

of narrative imagination, and Assmann, who more importantly underlines the importance of collective self-understanding maintained over time through cultural memory.

English literature can be viewed as a location in which cultural identity has been formed during different times in the interplay between forms of narrative, symbolic representation, and social historical context. Early and early modern works are characterized by the radicalization of national mythmaking as a measure to stabilize the collective memory and political legitimacy and correspond to Gellner's idea of cultural standardization as a key to the consolidation of the national identity. However, the shift to fragmented or hybridized identity discourse of the modernist and postcolonial writing is indicative of a wider cultural change in which identity is perceived as a moving and contentious phenomenon that needs to be reproduced through narrative in a continuous manner, which social constructionists also consider to be in line with the same argument where the identity cannot be held by rooting to fixed origins.

This relation fits into more general theoretical debates regarding identity as an acted-out and situationally specific role. According to Anglin et al. (2022), the role theory implies that individuals and groups embrace, transform, and oppose social roles in the cultural frameworks. Literature reflects this process as it gives characters roles that are either reflective, challenging, or problematic to national expectations. This way, narratives turn out to be a process of rehearsing and renegotiating cultural roles. The results of the study echo the analysis of identity spaces by Patton (2023), who makes it clear that the construction of cultural identity is ongoing both within the institutional and discursive settings. Literary works serve a similar purpose, providing symbolic points of culture centres where the identity can be confirmed, challenged, or reformulated - itself a modern manifestation of the cultural memory practices that Assmann outlined.

One of the major trends that can be identified because of the analysis is the erosion of nation

identities that are essentialized. With English literature entering the modern and postcolonial settings, the issues of identity are characterized more by border crossings, migration processes, and intercultural conflict. This agrees with the argument of Donnan and Wilson (2021) that the physical, cultural, and symbolic boundaries of borders are essential in determining how communities take care of the characteristics of insiders and outsiders. These border zones are frequently emphasized in contemporary literary works to show how identity is also created not just within nations, but also where they intersect and border a nation. Theoretically, these kinds of border-conscious narratives make older national imaginaries characterized by Anderson by preempting the instability of communal belonging. On the same note, the postcolonial reinterpretations question the cultural authority of the previous canonical texts. Mongia (2021) shows the establishment of the postcolonial theory to disrupt the imperial and national center-periphery models, and this approach is comparable to the reenactment of characters, histories, and cultural memories that were obscured by the hegemonic accounts. Literature is, therefore, turned into a platform where authority is rearranged and where oppressed identities express other forms of national imaginary; a direct attack on the homogenizing demands of culture, as cited by Gellner. This transition is also parallel to the development of what Connell (2020) calls Southern theory, that is, an understanding of the necessity to realize the identity and knowledge production that is not subjected to the dominance of Western epistemology. This trend is becoming more and more evident in modern English literature, which introduces the transnational, diasporic, and non-Western views into the terrain of cultural identity.

The results highlight the significance of critical literacy as a means of approach to comprehending identity in literature. Luke (2018) believes that critical literacy enables readers to understand the way in which texts organize social relations and cultural presumptions. Using this lens, a retroactive reading of earlier literary eras allows one to view them as the furthering of the dominant cultural narratives, and modern and postcolonial literature opens up the space where the reader can challenge the inherited identities. This approach to interpretation helps back up the claim by Anderson that national belonging is not a natural phenomenon and that it is a narrative construction, where readers are encouraged to recognize the inclusions and exclusions that are inherent in national narratives. Moreover, genre knowledge is also an important part of

understanding the development of identity. According to Tardy et al. (2020), genres do not exist as formal containers but as social actions that are placed within the cultural and ideological frames. This observation assists in understanding why identity issues change along with the development of genre, as in the case of medieval chronicles and the novel, and the realist tradition and experimental and postcolonial ones. Genre elasticity enables literature to keep up with new cultural conditions and express more complicated forms of identity. The theory of intercultural communication carries significant implications for the context of hybrid and negotiated identity in modern-day literature. According to Holliday (2021), intercultural identity is formed by means of decentering, negotiation, and blending of cultural resource patterns that are clearly present in postcolonial and diasporic texts that are being analyzed in this paper.

Collectively, the findings depict that the English literature not only mirrors the transformation of the national identity, but it also takes an active part in transforming it. Literary texts mediate the cultural memory, challenge ideological assumptions, and provide an opening for marginalized voices. Literature creates a dynamic system through narrative experimentation and hybrid forms, and through redefining genres in which national and cultural identities are constantly created and recreated. The role theory, postcolonial criticism, critical literacy, and intercultural communication integration highlight the multidimensional identity formation in literature. Meanwhile, the results confirm the conclusions made by Anderson, Gellner, and Assmann by showing that the national identity is still a narrative, culturally normative, and memory-based construction. The changing of cultural contexts leads to a change in the literary strategies through which identity is portrayed. The research, therefore, places English literature at the epicenter of cultural influences- one that can be used to maintain, disturb, and restructure the discourses that help communities shape the identities and destinies of other communities.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The discussion in this paper proves that English literature has traditionally been an important critical instrument, with which national and cultural identities are being imagined, reinforced, and redefined. Early accounts of collective belonging through to modern accounts of hybridity and displacement, literary works clarify the way in which the definition of identity is in a state of constant construction due to the historical forces, cultural

memory, and changing structures of power. The thematic patterns, which the study, it can be documents, include mythmaking, symbolic geography, and collective memory, but the study also enables tracing the development of counter-narratives that undermine the imperial dominance and disrupt the established national paradigms. By analyzing various literature periods, the study demonstrates that the process of identity formation in literature is not a linear and even process but is

characterized by bargaining, argumentation, and adaptation. Theoretical concepts about nationalism, cultural memory, genre, and intercultural discourse also contribute to the elucidation of the role of literary forms in the construction of social imaginaries. Finally, the conclusions prove that English literature continues to be an active cultural space, which can not only reproduce the tales of the past but also produce alternative images of belonging in a world that is more interconnected and more plural.

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