THE CONSTRUCTEDNESS OF ENGLISHNESS IN JULIAN

BARNES'S *ARTHUR & GEORGE*

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ABSTRACT

Matters of identity happen to be of a recurrent theme in postmodern fiction which reflects the zeitgeist of postmodern philosophy. The latter tends to display a sceptical view upon all past knowledge regarded as the knowledge which is, now, being rejected and the truthfulness alongside the authenticity of which is being evaluated. The present paper addresses the notion as well as the constructedness of Englishness in Julian Barnes's fictional work; Arthur & George and England, England, whereby Barnes treats Englishness as either an invented/constructed notion or an identity of its own existence.

KEYWORDS: Julian Barnes, Englishness, National Indoctrination, Postmodern Fiction, Arthur & George, England, England

INTRODUCTION

Barnes provides us with his position on history and religion through the portrayal of *Arthur Conan Doyle* and *George Edalji* as the prominent protagonists of his 505-pages novel; *Arthur & George*, whereby he implicitly shares his personal viewpoint in the attitude he holds through his characters (via heteroglossia), but within fictional technicalities. His critique of some social or cultural aspects of contemporary Britain is quite often revealed in the implicit discourse about inhumanity. The latter is formulated and rather expressed in different ways. It is also interchangeably used with the term *Dehumanization*. In the present paper, the dehumanization will be measured by the non-sympathetic behaviour between individuals, i.e., human beings of all carnations; including color, social stratum and racial descent/socio-cultural belonging. Racism is one particular aspect of inhumanity, a term whose existence designates the juxtaposition of the twofold good/evil intrinsic nature of Man. Hence, the currently treated subject of the postmodern condition of Man highlights the inclusive inhuman modes that are inflicted in Western societies; societies which constantly view and experience the advents of the utilitarian condition of modernity. The modern period characterized by the belief in progress of human history on the basis of empirical reasoning/rationalism. A period known for its optimism and absolutism in terms of evolutionary sciences which happen to be a by-pass into a skeptical period of doubts concerning the virtual yet sacred knowledge; that of religion and the transcendental in particular, alongside the evaluation of authentic truth in itself at broad.

Not only Man came to reverse the modern values/criteria, but he/she also happens to face a disillusionment, the roots of which hark back to a long track record found in the evolution of the previous times. The disillusionment is majorly that from the age of Enlightenment which promised modernity and progress, and yet was destructive; WWI & WWII. Man became mechanical, and the new wave of postmodernism thereafter has

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led man to reconsider his position with regards to the progressive spirit that modernity engendered.

Modernity or the absolute trust in rational thinking and empirical reasoning resulted in the alienation of Man and it has spoilt his/her symbiosis with the natural world. In fact, post-modernity simply accelerated the pace toward deeper alienation and estrangement.

Elitism, which is a sort of an abrupt opprobrium within the realm of values, is the affinity word for inhumanity and therefore dehumanization. The latter is in the sense that the belief in hyper-science has mechanized and therefore *dehumanized* the human being. Barnes displays the notion of Dehumanization quite repeatedly in his *Arthur & George*, through a multitude of both verbal and behavioural forms such as racism toward the 'Other'. Racism - in accordance to the story telling - takes place implicitly right from the first pages of the novel, when the author depicts the second prominent character; *George Ernest Thompson Edalji*, as having witnessed moments of racist - by which I ascribe here to 'inhuman' - treatment from the outside environment as opposed to his inside space wherein he was a dutiful child to his parents.

"There is the Vicarage, the church, the building where Mother teaches Sunday school, the garden, the cat, the hens, the stretch of grass they cross between the Vicarage and the church, and the churchyard. This is George's world, and he knows it well." (Barnes 2005: 8)

Barnes does infer notions of *George*'s indoctrination into the personification of Englishness with all of its regards. *George* - of a Parsee and English miscegenation - does belong to the Church of England, which some claim that: "In developing a sense of national identity … There is a case saying that the invention of the Church of England *was* the invention of England." (Paxman 1998: 97)

George regards himself an Englishman, except that he is 'not the right sort" (Barnes 2005: 12). His response, or rather reflection, in the narrative that at this particular moment, *George;* "feels as if he is being slowly banished from the way, the truth and the life." (Barnes 2005: 5); banished / stript from his indoctrinated beliefs of the Church of England, and thereafter, banished from his self-ascribed English identity.

The matter of racism is very striking throughout the novel; the setting of which is Edwardian England which fervently believed in the homogeneity of England. *George*, a Birmingham solicitor, was convicted for maiming horses and cattle under no "slight evidence to connect him to the crime with which he was charged" (Barnes 2005: 195), "the police had no evidence against him." (Barnes 2005: 149)

UNRECONCILIATED HISTORICITY OF ENGLISH RACISM IN *ARTHUR & GEORGE*

Right from WWII, racism soared to be of a constant problematic question and phenomenon in Great Britain, majorly England, and the Western world at broad. The English, a homogeneous blood, started to encounter a different 'breed' while the invention of the British Empire and its amplification spread worldwide. Racism, thereafter, was viewed as an attenuation of the homogeneity of the English; 'the Breed' (Paxman 1998: 176). To illustrate the English fear, or rather their dislike of their coexistence with the 'Other' historically, Jeremy Paxman; a twenty-first century social and historical commentator, refers to the 1963 Arthur Bryant's message to the *Illustrated London News'*s readers that: "'an influx … of men and women of alien race, accentuated by strongly marked differences of pigmentation and mould of feature, as well as habits and beliefs' would be very undesirable." (Paxman 1998: 71)

Jeremy Paxman holds that the notion of the ideal Englishman and -woman is of a mythical creation, he therefore

merely strengthens the distrust of the concept of Englishness ironically: "Oh, the Breed, how we miss them. Fearless and philistine, they were the embodiment of the ruling class … What the Breed represented was a certain ideal" (Paxman 1998: 177) of the self-propelled best race of all species. The ideal Englishmen; "were all driven men, with great ambitions, for themselves and for the Empire self-control extended much beyond the mortification of the flesh." (Paxman 1998: 181)

In accordance with Barnes's *Arthur & George, George* experienced moments of ostracism by the English community of his neighborhood; Great Wyrley Village. But the clear-displayed racism happens when *George Edalji* was convicted under no direct evidence against him. In fact, what the trial discussed was the supposed allegations thrown upon him, a far-fetched created scene of maiming horses by an intruder who puts it on the back of *George*. Here, the focus is upon racism toward non-English, non-white Man. Right to the present time, racism forms a capitalized trait of 19th-century Victorian Britain's social advents onto the Edwardian setting. Such worldly existing notions and matters belonging to the historiography of societies are very well portrayed by Barnes through his idiosyncratic ways of transmitting the behind-the-scene actual occurrences to his readers.

Barnes uses a scrutinized form of literary techniques that permit him to divulge some very distinct ideological perspectives, the roots of which hark back to the previous-centuries British historical as well as social and economic status. One could easily deduce from the bulk of his work that he fits the spectrum of the literary fictional frame although he is a writer of multidisciplinary contextualized themes. Barnes concerns himself with the visualized/witnessed inhumanity or the slight-hearted selves of the postmodern societies; a sort of a constant issue which claims itself quite vividly in the historical detective telling of *Arthur & George*.

His constant questionings upon matters of religiosity, and abstract spiritual 'spiritism' as he would prefer to term it, is consulted by his pious mother, and would consider these moral uncertainties and doubts as blasphemies:

"Arthur confides everything to the Mam: his deepest fears, his greatest elations, and all the intermediate tribulations and joys of the material world. What he never allude to is his deepening interest in spiritualism, or spiritism as he prefers it. The Mam, having left Catholic Church of Edinburgh behind, behind, has become by a sheer process of attendance, a member of the Church of England. Three of her children have now been married at St Oswald's: Arthur himself, Ida and Dodo. She is instinctively opposed to the psychic world, which for her represents anarchy and mumbo-jumbo. She holds that people can only come to any understanding of their lives if society makes clear its truths to them; further, that its religious truths must be expressed through an established institution, be it catholic or Anglican. And then there is the family to consider. Arthur is a knight of the realm, he has lunched and dined with the king; he is a public figure – she repeats back to him his boast that he is second only to Kipling in his influence on the healthy, sporting young men of the country. What if it came out that he was involved in séances and suchlike?" (Barnes 2005: 266)

His mother plays a tolerant role with regards to her son's spiritism despite her convictions, she contends that; "perhaps proof is impossible anyway. Perhaps the best we can manage is thinking and believing. Perhaps we only truly know in the hereafter." (Barnes 2005: 264)

Arthur's questionings about religion hark back to his childhood where he debated the principles in the school yard with his schoolmates. This alludes to the uncertainty of *Arthur*'s sceptical position concerning the acknowledgment of the surrounding beliefs with rational and reasonable logic. *Arthur*'s treatment of these principles is construed within the concept of agnosticism. For him, the factitiousness that these religious rules with the existence of the creator, God, is so

present that he could not reject them, but merely needed a tangible reason and explanation to them.

This great concern of *Arthur*'s in the world of spiritism, or precisely the existence of God - a fair God - to his created individual within a fair society, happens to be triggered substantially right from the "consuming evil" for the disease which attacked his wife *Touie* into a 'state of delirium' and thereafter to her extinction, death. He found himself helpless vis-à-vis that power above the 'force' upholding the will of his life and his surroundings. This superpower which claims to be a fair and humanistic existence went even beyond belief when his life crossed the one of *George Edalji* who was inhumanely treated by the world power, or God-like presence, the government; the Home Secretary and the Home Office. Justice as it is put: "The vicar described his son's treatment, by both the police and the Home Office, as *most shocking and heartless.* As for the conduct and conclusions of the Home Secretary and its committee: *This may be diplomacy, statecraft, but it is not what they would have done if he had been a son of an English squire or an English nobleman."* (Barnes 2005: 436-437)

In fact, Barnes expresses - as the predominant themes shaping the novel - the problematic of the notion of *Englishness* and what it entails; from themes of memory and identity, both personal and national (Barnes 2005: 156). He seems to be involved in a debate with a new interest or rather a new issue that portrays the present day social ambiance. Hence, the novel echoes the contemporary present day national consciousness (and thereafter, supranational by extrapolation) of issues of low crime and high spirituality. The latter supposedly fit the ideal Englishman's sense of honour and sense of duty which appeals itself in *Arthur*'s commitment to his wife, yet having a secret sexual intercourse with *Miss Jean Leckie*.

Opposing his spiritual beliefs, as an agnostic, he ignores all traditional Christian tenets and values. Yet, he displays some form of guilt toward his wife whom he believes is innocent. He was cheating on her with his paramour; *Jean* for some ten long years while his wife, *Touie*, was being consumed. Similarly, on the ground of self-blame and guilt, *George* also feels guilty when facing the police conviction, identity and nationality as well as race, and the big theme recurring constantly in Barnes's novels and narratives at broad (detective stories under pseudonyms and short stories), the problematic of wanting to know the authentic truth; questioning and doubting notions of what we think, what we know, and what we believe, these epistemological concerns have always constituted the core concerns of the his narratives. Matthew Pateman asserts this position in that: "Barnes's novels are all searching for ways of knowing the world, each other; they all have characters who are striving for ways of finding meaning in an increasingly depoliticized, secularized, localized, and depth-less world." (Pateman 2002: 2)

Throughout this narrative of an Edwardian feel, Barnes makes the reader - either thematically or contextually - encounter a problematic of racial prejudice and "national identity that resonates with the contemporary assumptions about belonging and naturalization" (Groes & Childs 2011: 158). This is striking in the way Barnes constructs these prominent characters in a somehow self-ascribed idealized identity, if we take the following example:

"Irish by ancestry, Scottish by Birth, instructed in the faith of Rome by the Dutch Jesuits, Arthur became English. English history inspired him; English freedom made him proud; English cricket made him patriotic. And the greatest epoch in English history - with many to choose from - was the fourteenth century: a time when the English archer commanded the field, and when both the French and the Scottish kings were held prisoner in London … For Arthur the roots of Englishness lay in the long-gone, long-remembered, long-invented world of chivalry. There was no knight more faithful that Sir Kaye, none so brave and amorous as Sir Lancelot, none do virtuous and Sir Galahad … and of course there was no

braver or more noble king than Arthur?" (Barnes 2005: 31)

Arthur, here, expresses his Scottish and Irish origins, but he considers himself a true Englishman since he conforms to the rules and boundaries and does personify the criteria of what being English entails. We now know what Barnes alludes to as to what Englishness really means historically. In other words, the author demystifies it by unmasking the myth of Englishness as being more of a socio-cultural construct rather than ethnic. Englishness, as a notion, appears to have been constructed and is attainable by a given set of perspective virtues. The tone of the story-telling however confers a sort of coming mistrust and disillusionment at the end of the story.

Arthur is English at heart, and the sort of exaggerated idealization of "English Freedom" always refers to a disappointing and a counterclaim effect - as the story unfolds - of the earlier beliefs. Among other aspects of *Arthur*'s disillusionment of the fervently averred Englishness in its whole is the contribution of his involvement in the investigation of the miscarriage of Edalji which made him aware of the English; the reality of the worldly-acclaimed portrayal of freedom and righteousness, the beholders of rationality, emancipation, and a strong sense of duty.

Yet, this conscious identity realization "clearly and irrevocably weakened his belief in the English Justice system" (Groes & Childs 2011: 157). *George*'s pride in his Englishness, on the other hand, is instilled by the repetitive instructions of his Parsee father throughout his childhood's early learning:

"George, where do you live?

The Vicarage, Great Wyrley.

And where is that?

Staffordshire, father, is the beating heart of the Empire, father.

And where is that?

The centre of England.

And what is England, George?

England is the beating heart of the Empire, father.

Good, and what is the blood that flows through the arteries and veins of the Empire to reach even its farthest shore?

The Church of England.

Good, George." (Barnes 2005: 23)

Here, *George* was propelled into a typical indoctrination into Englishness, as is mentioned to be a mythical notion of a secure English identity by the use of "mantra" which is tangentially reminiscent of the character of *England, England* (1998), wherein *Martha Cochrane* culturally-indoctrinates the children of the class through chanting the landmarks of the history of Great Britain;

"55BC (clap clap) Roman Invasion

1066 (clap clap) Battle of Hastings

1215 (clap clap) Magna Carta

1512 (clap clap) Henry the Eight (clap clap)

Defender of Faith (clap clap) …

1940 (clap clap) Battle of Britain

1973 (clap clap) Treaty of Rome" (Barnes 1998: 11)

Accordingly, Barnes "clearly points out nationality's artificiality, it's often ascribed to be a laborious acquisition and its early imprint on impressionable children." (Groes & Childs 2011: 157)

In the same respects, Barnes contends that this national Identity acquisition is immersed within both of *Arthur* and *George* unconsciously, despite their unrelated bloodlines to the English 'Breed'. Barnes implicitly drives the reader to be aware of a sense of the "memory of a lost England" (Groes & Childs 2011: 11). *George*'s witty visualization and ulterior thoughts/minds indirectly render blatant, wondering at a map of England staring at the Empire's 'bloodiness', giving him "the pulse of blood in his ears" (Barnes 2005: 23-24). This pulse alludes to a confused state of mind, what England is, her greatness, lies in the English self-ascribed superiority, and the exaggerated national celebration of England's historical victories, the latter, being radiated from "a certain element of myth-making … but their durability tell us something about the way the British see themselves. The common thread is sacrifice in an against-the-odds adventure … The impression if always of a small, nobly embattled people." (Paxman: 1998: 88)

The Edwardian era is characterized by the conflictual social as well as the psychological state of individuals, being torn between preaching the dominant absolutism of religion, or the evolutionist rational absolutism of logicism, leading to a sceptic attitude toward religion. The predominance of science induced the debasement of the spiritual/religious importance in shaping the individuals' minds and lives.

ARTHUR'S AND *GEORGE*'S RICHNESS OF THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE EDWARDIAN ERA ARE SIMPLY ENTANGLED

"In order to express Edwardian anxieties that change, in particular, the mythical notion of a secure English identity as yet unscathed by two world wars … Whereas many twentieth-century novels depict the Edwardian era as some kind of Indian summer of English supremacy and unchallenged greatness, Barnes depicts, in particular, Edwardian Englishness as an unstable concept, one that is not necessarily, as common myth would have it, innate and inimitable, but on the contrary, on that is laboriously studied and painstakingly applied - a façade, rather than a nation's pride." (Groes & Childs 2011: 156)

For Barnes, when it comes to national identity, he shares the same position with J. Paxman on the myth-making of English identity. He happens to be unable to give a clear succinct definition of what makes an Englishman. He contends, in an interview, that it is a process through which:

"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. Its fabulation all over again – convincing ourselves of coherence between things that are largely true and things that are wholly imagined." (Guignery & Roberts 2009: 63)

However what makes of this urge; the implementation of "the idea of England" and the definition of Englishness regarded as a reductive sense of a nation; "'the thinning down of the national culture of each country' is indeed the price we're paying for a "much greater homogenization and internationalization" (Guignery & Roberts 2009: 142) of the world.

Hence, Englishness, for Barnes, is only a *mythical* exertion and created/fabulated notion upon the unchallenged greatness of the English historical supremacy, and a greatness being emulated and voiced in numerous narratives of 20th-century literature. An example is the English consideration of *otherness* as being of a lesser civilizational and even physical stratum and nature. In an interview, Barnes was asked to define the essence of the nature of being English, his response was that:

"One of the things about the British, the English particularly, is that they're not very good about what it means to be English [but typically generally an Englishman of woman] You think that you are the norm and that everyone else is a variant form of what it is the norm. The Welsh and the Irish and Scots have always had the English to define themselves against, whereas the English don't really know who to define themselves against." (Guignery & Roberts 2009: 142)

Englishness - which the reader perceives while reading the novel – is the Englishness of Barnes, through his wordy description of the characters and ironically enough, very elaborate and reminiscent of an English, typical *blue blood*'s self-ascribed superior genes. It is here where the old Edwardian displayed superiority of the English toward the 'Other' is brought to a blatant similitude with the 21st-century, postmodern Englishman. This suggests the long-forged inevitability of the self-applied superiority of the Englishness over *otherness*. The former, as being ascribed to *the* civilization throughout the 20th century, seems to entangle a sceptical view regarding its authenticity in the late 20th century/ early 21st century. An example of a critical study by Jeremy Paxman; *The English: A Portrait of a People* (1998), in which he notes the viewpoint of a visitor - around the late 1400's and early 1500's - that; "the English are great lovers of themselves" and an Englishman takes it a pity that nice-looking foreigners were not English, implying they were lesser human beings (Paxman 1998: 35). Another illustration of Paxman quoting the visitors, here, the Dutch merchant; Emmanuel van Meteren's position on the English; "the people are bold, courageous, ardent and cruel in war, but very inconstant, rash, vainglorious, light and deceiving, and very suspicious, especially of foreigners, whom they despise." (Paxman 1998: 35)

Other contributory influences and aspects in the setting apart of the English as a unique race alongside their self-appointed superiority are majorly due to the isolation of their geographical setting; "they were born on an island rather than living on a continental landmass" (Paxman 1998: viii), and that, "geography matters, it makes people who they are" (Paxman 1998: 3). Another aspect which is a major incident in the history of Great Britain is that the English "came from a country where protestant reformation has put the Church firmly in its place. They [therefore] inherited a deep belief in individual liberty." (Paxman 1998: 3)

At a same historical accordance, the powerful armada of Elizabeth I, the first in the world which defeated the most powerful nation, Spain, at the time, such an occurrence has earned the English a sense of pride and strength, alongside other victories during the Second World War which asserted the English sense of duty toward their land. Whether these victories are being reported in a delusional exaggeration or not, England has perished in a sense of pride and honour, which are their most possessed prizes.

Nevertheless, the most important factor for the English superior contentment owes to the role of the Protestant

Church of Henry VIII's demand for reformation, putting Protestantism ahead of Catholicism. "In a sense, England is hardly a Protestant country at all. As every schoolboy knows, its national church was invented so that Henry VIII could get a divorce." (Paxman 1998: 98)

The English also owe their strong pride of their national identity much to the invention of Anglicanism since; "the invention of the Church of England w*as* the invention of England" (Paxman 1998: 97), even though the English "were not in any meaningful sense religious, the Church of England being a political invention which had elevated being 'a good chap' to something akin to canonization" (Paxman 1998: 6). They had what they call a self-created doctrine conceived under the omission of the tyranny of the Roman Catholic Church, with a book replacing the Bible which was the most valuable referential book in the land after the Bible; that of John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563), the aim of which was to strengthen the English confidence in alleviating their reluctance over the withering away of Catholicism. It describes how the Protestants were persecuted and executed during Queen Mary's attempt to turn England back to Rome. The book has, indeed, considerably, contributed in rendering England anti-clerical, and that's how the English like their Church to be.

Barnes's abounding tangible illustration of the Edwardian era permits him to give an overall idea about the exact feel and tone for its creation. The social, human, ideological, and religious ambiance of the whole era is what Barnes tends to superpose over the detailed aspects of it. This helps his reader have a view over the broad characteristics of the period covering the social and ideological mood which shaped not only the period at the historical level, but also the attributes that propelled and constrained the protagonists throughout their lives. The importance of the conflicts and the dilemmas as experienced through *Arthur*'s doubts of any religious essence, casts some scepticism upon the authenticity of what constitutes a human being in terms of both existential and national identity related to the long forged Englishness. The idealization of the latter throughout centuries, encompassing honour, sense of duty as displayed in *Arthur*'s behaviour and character; striking and conflictual criteria representing the Edwardian mood. This demeans the properties of Edwardian England, in the sense where within that period, whereby a realistic stance came to strike the English, as they happen to have lost the constructedness of what makes their 'greatness' on the civilizational spectrum.

Barnes also puts forward Doyle's chivalric mannerism toward women, despite his contradicting sexual oppressive expressionism. The latter is reflected in an interview again, with Stuart Jeffries (2005), which Barnes assumingly relates this English typicality vis-à-vis sex to; "a tradition of English emotional reticence which can easily fall away into inexpensive oppressiveness and frigidity" (Guignery and Roberts 2009: 132). An attitude presumed proper to the English as known throughout the centuries, their representation in books, movies, even though Barnes seems to mourn that period, alluding to a sort of 'there used to be an England so idiosyncratically distinguished, unique and different, with its characteristics so proper to 'her', it's no more that England nowadays, it's been commercialized and 'universalized' (Guignery and Roberts 2009: 143).

CONCLUSIONS

Revealing as it were the inner functioning of this period, yet a general scene of the typical Edwardian society is stressed upon, Barnes not only posters the ideal Englishness but he also gives a historical transition of what and how old England was and how it has been, and is becoming. Barnes even alludes to the imperceptible and inevitable existence of these conflictual matters, the psychological and social in particular, to have a long-rooted essence which implicitly clamor the visibility of these traits as being attributes of the English societal "uniqueness".

Assumingly, Englishness happens to be of a 'mythical' constructedness, reinforced by the historical background of England. Secondly, the theme of identity as - fictionally speaking of the novel - has an actual post-war social dimension, rather crisis, alluding to the mass immigration alongside the psychological, existential (substantial), and social conflictual issues of belonging of the citizens of foreign descent, and therefore to what extent could naturalization's role be decisive of one's cultural and national categorization.

Hence, Englishness, for Barnes, is only a 'mythical' exertion and notion upon the unchallenged greatness of the *English Supremacy* on the historical ground, and a greatness being emulated and voiced in numerous narratives of 20th-century literature. An example is the English consideration of otherness as being of a lesser civilizational and physical nature.

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