



THE EVOLUTION OF CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FICTION

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Abstract

By the late 1980s, the influence of postmodernism in British literature had begun to decline. This observation is supported by scholars from England as well as from Russia and other European countries.

Furthermore, the scholar notes that Thatcherite policies engendered an ideology centered on individual success and accumulation. This development, in turn, facilitated the emergence of a consumer society. By the late 1990s, a “cultural shift” occurred within British society – conspicuous consumption came to be regarded as outdated, and a new “politics of conscience,” frequently focused on environmental concerns and social inequality, began to supplant the leftist politics of the previous generation. [1]

During this period, according to Nick Bentley, political issues were prominently addressed in British fiction. Notably, critiques of Thatcherism are found in works such as Jonathan Coe’s “What a Carve Up!” and “The Closed Circle”, Alan Hollinghurst’s “The Line of Beauty”, and Will Self’s “Dorian”, among others. Other significant political themes include the Northern Ireland conflict, represented in Coe’s “The Rotters’ Club” and contemporary Scottish dramas; the Cold War and arms race, explored by Martin Amis, J.G. Ballard, and Graham Swift; and terrorism – particularly the events of September 11, 2001 – depicted in Monica Ali’s “Brick Lane”, Ian McEwan’s “Saturday”, and Ballard’s “Millennium People” and “Kingdom Come”.

Bentley identifies a second major thematic cluster in the sociocultural domain. This encompasses issues of class division, with many works advocating for a classless society, as seen in the writings of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, E.P. Thompson, and Stuart Hall. Additionally, the blurring of class boundaries



through expanded access to higher education is a prominent concern in the works of Monica Ali, Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis, A.S. Byatt, Jonathan Coe, Margaret Drabble, and others.

A further thematic focus among contemporary British writers involves gender and sexuality. Postfeminist ideas and “chick lit,” emphasizing the self-identification of modern women in society, are developed in the works of Jeanette Winterson, Janice Galloway, Doris Lessing, Emma Tennant, and Fay Weldon. Moreover, issues related to sexism, sexual politics, and sexual and gender identity are explored by authors such as Helen Fielding, Jane Green, Julie Burchill, and Hanif Kureishi.

According to Bentley, one of the fundamental thematic concerns of contemporary British fiction is the exploration of postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and national identity. The multinational character of modern Britain, ethnic belonging, and the transformation of British citizens into a multicultural nation constitute a spectrum of issues addressed in works such as Monica Ali’s “Brick Lane”, Hanif Kureishi’s “The Buddha of Suburbia”, Salman Rushdie’s “Shame”, James Kelman’s “How Late It Was, How Late”, Niall Griffiths’s “Sheepshagger”, among many others.

Finally, the last thematic cluster identified by Nick Bentley concerns the depiction of youth and youth subcultures. Coming-of-age narratives are explored in works such as Monica Ali’s Brick “Lane”, Jeanette Winterson’s “Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit”, Nick Hornby’s “Fever Pitch”, Ian McEwan’s “Atonement”, among others. Additionally, issues related to youth subcultures and drug addiction are addressed in the writings of Irvine Welsh and Nicholas Blincoe. It is noteworthy that these authors often portray contemporary youth in a predominantly negative light.

Thus, according to Nick Bentley, the developmental trends of contemporary English literature coalesce around five central themes: politics, class relations, gender and sexuality, multiculturalism and national identity, and youth and subcultures.

Professor Andrzej Gasiorek of the University of Birmingham, author of the renowned monograph *Postwar British Fiction: Realism and Beyond*, characterizes twentieth-century English prose by identifying the following



periods: postwar realism; late modernism as social critique; politics and history during the Caribbean Crisis; the post-socialist realism phase; contemporary liberalism; feminist literature; postmodernism and issues of history; and the emergence of new British realism.

By “New British Realism,” Professor Gasiorek refers to a renewed form of realism incorporating various experimental strategies. He argues that “contemporary realism should be understood as an open form oriented towards the social sphere, which it does not reduce to discursive modes but rather seeks new ways to represent new realities.” [3]

In his article on the contemporary British novel, Malcolm Bradbury asserts that the second half of the twentieth century witnessed significant transformations in the generic structure of English literature. The defining tendency of 1980s and 1990s literature was diverse experimentation, resulting in a synthesis of lyric, epic, and dramatic elements. “Pure” genres disappeared, replaced by “transformers,” marking a trajectory described as “from puritanism to postmodernism, from postmodernism to renewed tradition” [2] – this constitutes the vector of contemporary English literature’s development.

In other words, following Bradbury’s logic, the evolution of English literature in the latter half of the twentieth century can be characterized by the sequence: realism → postmodernism → experimental realism. Accordingly, Bradbury also contends that by the early twenty-first century, postmodernism had ceded its dominance to experimental approaches at the level of realist poetics.

Slavic literary scholars have also actively engaged with the development of contemporary British literature. For instance, Sofia Murashkovski, in her article “Multiculturalism in Contemporary English Literature,” argues that since the 1970s, the term “English literature” has come to encompass not only literary works produced within the British Isles but also texts written in English by authors who are not ethnically English. The researcher emphasizes the emergence of the concept of “New English Literature,” which combines the following categories:

a) Literature by writers who are British citizens but not of British ethnic origin; these individuals arrived in Britain during their youth and, having received



excellent education at English universities, command the English language fluently in both speech and writing.

b) First-generation descendants of immigrants of foreign origin, who retain certain cultural and psychological archetypes from their ancestral backgrounds, yet are fully proficient in both the English language and traditional British cultural and literary heritage.

c) A broad range of authors from former colonial countries who write in English as a second official language and feel a sense of belonging to the Anglophone cultural sphere.

d) Writers who are distinctly bilingual, employing two languages not only in everyday communication but also within their literary creative practices.

Thus, multiculturalism is a defining characteristic of contemporary English literature.

Olga Sidorova's monograph "Contemporary Literature of the United Kingdom and Cultural Contacts" provides a comprehensive overview of the development of British literary prose from the 1980s to 2010. However, as the author herself notes, "We are not writing a history of British literature—we have compiled a collection of articles written at different times, devoted to British prose of this period, which, in our view, complement each other and collectively create a portrait characterizing the development of the literary process in Britain during the specified period." [4]

Sidorova identifies several key trends marking the late twentieth century, including multicultural literature, the emergence of new Scottish literature, neo-Victorian prose, and "chick lit" (literature written by women for women). According to Sidorova, the early twenty-first century has been characterized by "literature of pathological themes," "millennial dystopias," and "literature of gender identity," as well as nostalgia and historical fiction. [4]

Leading contemporary authors include Helen Fielding, Beryl Bainbridge, Rudyard Kipling, Alasdair Gray, Muriel Spark, Ian Rankin, James Kelman, Kazuo Ishiguro, David Lodge, Nick Hornby, Julian Barnes, A.S. Byatt, and others.

In conclusion, Sidorova asserts that "contemporary British prose draws upon both the national literary tradition and the literary traditions situated on the periphery



of the European cultural and literary process. At the same time, the genre system of British literature undergoes rethinking and transformation (including the expansion of historical prose, the emergence of neo-Victorian novels, and the incorporation of specific literary trends into the mainstream).” [4]

Thus, it can be concluded that the developmental trends of contemporary British literature are shaped by influences from documentary fiction, ethnic literature, feminist prose, campus novels, alternative fiction, post-ironic and popular literature, postmodern novels, as well as renewed realism.

References

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