

# A Review of England, England and Its Portrayal of Collective Identity

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**Abstract.** Published in 1996, Julian Barnes' *England, England* is a novel that addresses several thought-provoking themes, such as the clash between the old versus the new, the intersection of national and personal identity, and the resurgence of modern nationalism. In particular, the novel *England, England* provides interesting discussions regarding how collective memories of a nation and its people can be used and manipulated. This is a topic that was wholly portrayed as ridiculous in the novel but may be finding an increasing resemblance in today's political developments worldwide. This paper analyses Barnes' novel and examines his portrayal of nationalism and collective identity through the lens of both the fictional new "England, England" and the traditional "Anglia." In doing so, Barnes argues the importance of authenticity and serves as a cautionary voice against the danger of unawareness and ignorance. In *England, England*, as with collective identity, an individual's construction of identity becomes intertwined with a nation's reconstruction of its history. The study offers a deeper understanding of the novel's profound commentary on identity, history, and the manipulation of national narratives, which holds significant relevance in today's socio-political landscape.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, England, England, Julian Barnes, collective identity.

## 1. Introduction

Julian Barnes' *England, England* is a satirical novel that discusses authenticity, nationalism, and England [1]. Initially published in 1996, it follows the story of the arrogant Sir Jack Pitman and the ambitious Martha Cochrane. To memorialize his career with a magnum opus, the former builds *England, England*, a theme park that condenses all of "what makes England" into the Isle of Wight. The Island, later overtaken by Martha, gradually becomes a fief and eventually surpasses the original England, or "Old England," which descends into obscurity as it loses its history and sense of identity to the imitation. One of the novel's central themes is how nationalist ideology and collective memory are manipulated to influence and control the public and the importance of discerning between replica and original. These topics in Barnes' novel are becoming increasingly relevant as nationalism appears to be making a resurgence.

There is no established consensus on the definition of nationalism, just as there is no singular definition for what a nation is. Both terms are subjective to each historian and discovered *a posteriori* [2]. However, this essay presents the definition of Barrington: A nation is a collective of people united by shared cultural features (such as language, myths, and values) and the belief in the right to territorial self-determination [2]. As for nationalism, the term is defined by Gellner as "a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent [3]."

Collective memory, also referred to as social memory or collective identity, was introduced by historians as a concept suggesting that an individual's personality and character are derived from their belonging to a society or a collective [4]. It is believed to be responsible for directing a group's behaviour and experiences in society, and it is obtained through repeated societal practices and enculturation [4]. These practices come from important texts and repeated symbols in the history of the society, becoming stable reference points, which Assman refers to as "figures of memory."

However, as the history that groups call upon is often centuries, even millennia old, these moments are reconstructed, sometimes appropriated, or transformed to present a particular image of cultural identity. A group establishes its unity and specificity through collective memories and derives social

norms and boundaries from this shared knowledge, a process that defines the group's identity [4]. Identification is built through either positive or negative distinction [5].

In the context of linking cultural identity to nationalism, a nation and its members are, to an extent, held together by this shared cultural feature, the collective identity, which is derived from historical moments. The group is depicted in a favourable light to build esteem and effervescence. Additionally, when an individual's account or story diverges from what the collective believes, that story is more likely to be erased and silenced.

## 2. Historical Background

By the 20th century, modern nationalism was considered to be declining, especially in Western Europe, as it faced scrutiny and criticism from studies on nationalism [6]. National pride, for instance, declined significantly in the 1980s in countries like Britain and Germany, with a high percentage of individuals responding with "not proud" in response to the *Eurobarometer* survey question "Would you say you are very proud, quite proud, not very proud, or not at all proud to be (nationality)?" [6].

The consensus was that nationalism had accomplished its mission since people had become sovereign of their lands [7]. Historians such as Hobsbawm predicted its failure in the face of globalization, as the power of a "nation" would be weakened when the "territorially bounded 'national economy'" was superseded by the larger "world economy" [8].

Regardless, nationalism has seemed to re-emerge in the current century. Some scholars have begun to distinguish between types of nationalism, labelling "civic nationalism" (nationalism not based on ethnicity but on liberal qualities such as freedom and rights) as "good nationalism" [7]. Additionally, the prosperity brought by globalization may be used to support nation-states and the appeal for greater autonomy; nationalism has, in a sense, adapted to modernity [9]. One of the most prominent examples of 21st-century nationalism, as many see it, is Brexit. In summary, three factors were argued to underlie dissatisfaction with the EU: Eurosceptic politicians claiming that the bloc posed a threat to the UK's political independence, companies facing bottlenecks and exacerbated bureaucracy, while the working class was concerned primarily about jobs, wages, and housing costs, which were then attributed to the European migration crisis [10]. Although the first two groups were considered aware of their reasons for discontent, the British people generally did not appear to be sure about the issue, and this uncertainty was used to nurture a xenophobic sentiment [10]. The Leave side often used terminology such as "national self-determination," invoking the language of nationalism [7].

With the background information presented, this paper aims to investigate the question: How does Julian Barnes depict nationalism and collective memory in *England, England*? As mentioned previously, this question becomes increasingly relevant and worthy of discussion as nationalism seems to rise once more.

## 3. England, England

*England, England*, as mentioned above, was an idea for a theme park proposed by Sir Jack Pitman. It represents one of the core discussions presented throughout the novel: whether a replica could replace the original. According to Barnes, the former could even succeed it. Even back in the planning stages of "England, England," the French intellectual brought in by Sir Jack states, "It is important to understand that in the modern world we prefer the replica to the original because it gives us the greater frisson" [1]. This quote sets the expectations for the rest of the novel, as it is proven true repeatedly.

Sir Jack's plans for the Island involved compiling a list of "Fifty Quintessences of Englishness from a poll, with the items including the "Royal Family," "imperialism," "Marks & Spencer," and more [1]. The plan relies entirely on absurd stereotypes and surface impressions, with many members of Sir Jack's board, including Martha and Dr. Max, seeing the project as despicable and a mockery, openly discussing their distaste throughout the novel. When the Island is fully constructed, it is a blatant parody of England and its history, saturated with references to Shakespeare and "stiff upper

lips” [1]. The descriptions of England, England may appear laughable; Sir Jack considered himself to have condensed the “essence” of England, all of its history and attributes that define the country, into an artificial and commercialized theme park, small enough to fit within the Isle of Wight. It is saturated, “a sort of fast-forward version of England” [1]. The premise, by all means, should be absurd.

Nevertheless, as the novel progresses into the second act, it becomes evident that not only is England, England functional and popular, but it slowly begins to replace Old England. The Royal Family and the Manchester Union Football Club are paid to live on the Island, and paid actors re-enact scenes from English history each day. Chapter Three in Act Two begins with a news article depicting England, England, now run by Martha, which has become a popular attraction to visitors and tourists. Instead of being viewed as derivative, England, England is praised for its efficiency.

The reason behind this preference, the allowance for the construction of England, England to even have happened, is suggested by Barnes to be the ignorance of history of the public and their consensus to follow figures of memory unthinkingly and mindlessly. Earlier in the novel, when Dr Max interviews British citizens and quizzes them on British history, he comes to the disappointing conclusion that “Most people remembered history in the same conceited yet evanescent fashion as they recalled their own childhood” [1]. He attributes this to a paradox that “Patriotism’s most eager bedfellow was ignorance, not knowledge” [1]. To link the novel back to the concept of collective memory, the identity of a group (a nation in this case) is built on figures of memory or these representations of history.

People of Barnes’ *England, England* wanted to belong and immerse themselves in this identity, as shallow and hollow as it was. As Patrick Christian states, “We are what we remember ourselves to be.” The theme park replaced the original England because the people were keen to ignore the artificiality and confabulation on the Island, as long as the positive image of their collective memory was maintained. England, England becomes a hyperreality. In terms of collective identity, everything is a replica to an extent; history is shaped by each person who tells it. In *England, England*, authenticity is discarded for the imitation because “The point is that most people don’t want what you and your colleagues think of as history — the sort you get in books — because they don’t know how to deal with it” [1].

#### 4. Anglia

The last chapter of the novel features Martha returning to Old England, which has descended into its primitive, medieval past. The people there have largely abandoned technology and closed themselves off from the outside world, renaming their territory as Anglia. Following the logic of the argument above, if England, England is the replica, then Martha’s return should be seen as a return to originality. She never truly believed in England, England; Barnes states that “the main difference between the previous and current CEOs was that Sir Jack Pitman vociferously believed in his product whereas Martha Cochrane privately did not” [1]. Thus, Old England should be something to be believed in, the authentic.

However, are these two Englands indeed so different? Old England’s return to Anglia suggests that it, like England, England, in fact, similarly clung to a moment in collective memory. The villagers in Anglia became blacksmiths and schoolmasters, then revived festivals and traditions like the May Queen. They crowded around Martha upon learning that she had grown up in the countryside, “petition [ing] her for memories” [1]. If anything, the actors in England, England who were reluctant to use company accommodation because they were so immersed in their roles as threshers and shepherds, are not so different from the villagers living in Anglia, who asked Martha for stories of the countryside because they had none of their own. Both are trying to impersonate and replicate a figure of memory, a symbol of history. Thus, with the ending of *England, England*, Barnes demonstrates the power of collective identity over a given group and how authenticity is lost in pursuing this identity.

## 5. Conclusion

In *England, England*, Julian Barnes offers a satirical commentary in which England is imagined to be a theme park. Behind the sarcastic barbs and sometimes absurd plot, Barnes emphasizes the dangers of ignorance, especially in terms of history. Most importantly, by presenting a situation devoid of authenticity, Barnes inversely highlights the importance of being genuine.

To answer the research questions of this study, Barnes represents collective identity as a method of controlling and manipulating the masses, who submit to it due to their lack of awareness. Martha articulates this by saying, “An individual’s loss of faith and a nation’s loss of faith, aren’t they much the same?” [1]. In *England, England*, as with collective identity, an individual’s construction of identity becomes intertwined with a nation’s reconstruction of its history.

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