

Role Performance and the Construction of Identity in *England, England*

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Abstract

As a crucial topic and a major concern of modern British fiction, the construction of identity is mainly discussed in Barnes's *England, England*. This paper explores how the characters in the Theme Park pursue their personal identity and how they engage themselves in the confusion and construction of real identity in the postmodern world of simulacrum. From the perspective of Bakhtin's crowning and decrowning, the paper points out that changing role performance affects the construction of personal identity on the one hand, and reveals their identity crisis in the simulacrum world on the other hand.

Keywords

England, England, identity, role performance, crowning and decrowning.

1. Introduction

Julian Barnes is a British novelist who represents the development and achievement of modern British novels. In 1998, he published the novel *England, England*, and it was nominated for the Booker Prize at the same year. As Barnes states that, the book is about "the idea of England, authenticity, the search for truth, the invention of a tradition, and the way in which we forget our own history" (Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes* 105). Barnes pays attention to the "Englishness", which is a major concern in modern British society and attracts the attention of literary critics. Critics mainly focus on the construction of national identity (or Englishness), and provide less contribution to the characters' pursuit of personal identity. As a result, Bakhtin's concepts of crowning and decrowning offer valuable scope to examine changing roles of characters in this novel and the construction of personal identity.

Mikhail Bakhtin sees the act of crowning/ decrowning is an essential part of the carnival elements. "Crowning and decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all hierarchical position. Crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start, and a decrowning glimmers through the crowning." (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* 124) That is to say, this carnival ritual negates the absoluteness and completeness in the form of change and subversion. From this perspective, this paper sheds light on the quest for personal identity of the project members and backdrop characters in the process of crowning and decrowning.

2. Martha: Inauthentic Memory and Self-pursuit

According to the traditional identity theory, individuals face the task of constructing a fixed subjective cognition and experience of coordinating differences on the basis of the different experience derived from different roles during the development of identity. However, for the post-modern patchwork identity theory, what is at the center is not a stable identity, but the production process of identity. As

Liu suggests, the construction of identity is inseparable from memory, which forms the foundation of firm beliefs related to the individual and directly participates in the construction of identity (Liu 56). Nevertheless, in *England, England*, the protagonist Martha Cochrane distrusts her memory, which hinders the complete construction of self-identity and her sense of reality. At the beginning of the novel, Martha tries to construct individual identity by digging out the memory in her childhood, but at the same time she consciously questioned the authenticity of her memory. When she was asked about her first memory, she remembers that she was sitting on the matted kitchen floor, and her mother was cooking and humming old songs in the background. The mat was covered with “Counties of England jigsaw puzzle” (4). But she realizes that the first memory is a lie, “her first artfully, innocently arranged lie” (4). Martha insists that there is no pure, no “true”, no “unprocessed” memory (5), and the original memory tends to accumulate and then transform. When she recollects her favorite English jigsaw puzzle in the childhood, she always missed the last piece and couldn’t find it. When disappointment and frustration at the imperfection of the world comes upon her, her father always appear in time and magically find the missing piece to help her make up the whole puzzle. Finding the missing piece, her jigsaw, her England, her heart has been made whole again. When her father is gone, discarding her and her mother, Martha considers that the reason of her father’s departure is that he goes to find the missing piece of the jigsaws for her. “Without the missing piece of the puzzle, Martha has a broken sense of completeness very much in the way that she always feels the presence of the missing piece of fatherly compassion in her heart” (SÜMBÜL 71). However, it is until her meeting with her father in twenty-five years old that she gets the truth: she is abandoned by her father. As a result, it proves that her memory is inauthentic. Memory has a dangerous function, and it will give things meaning that they don’t have. “Broken bits and pieces of memory give human beings the power to write a history of their own with or without reference to actual events in the past” (SÜMBÜL 71). It must be effaced by an artificial memory. Fraudulent childhood memory has a major impact on her completeness of identity, so she continues to pursue real self-identity.

When she grew up, she joins Sir Jack Pitman’s project of the Theme Park and then she is crowned the CEO of this park. As Bakhtin states that “all carnivalistic symbols are of such a sort: they always include within themselves a perspective of negation (death) or vice versa. Birth is fraught with death, and death with new birth” (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s poetics* 125). Apparently, Martha has achieved great success in her career; she actually is anxious about the truth and tries to find personal identity, seeking happiness as much as possible. Working in the simulacrum world where everything is duplicated and everybody is personated, Martha gradually blurs the distinction between the authentic and the copy. Martha actively participates in the establishment of the Theme Park and effectively promotes the implementation of the project. In spite of that, “The main difference between the previous and current CEOs was that Sir Jack Pitman vociferously believed in his project whereas Martha Cochrane’s privately did not” (191). She only regards it as a plausible and well-planned way of making money. That is to say, she cannot find her value and the reality in the work. The author uses the narrative of Dr Max, the historian in the Theme Park, to show Martha’s doubt about the identity construction, “As for being c-onstructed... well, so are you, Miss Cochrane, and so am I, constructed”, “most people, in my opinion, steal much of what they are. If they didn’t, what poor items they would be. You’re just as constructed” (133-134). In other words, Martha and others on the Isle of Wight all undergo the crisis of identity, and their identities are fabricated and modified in order to adapt to the hyper-real world. Martha cannot find a sort of certainty to support her self-identity from hyper-real work, she thereupon losses the sense of belonging in the simulacrum. Only when she gets along with her love Paul can she feel that there is something she is willing to believe in. However, this love and trust is transient since her increasing dissatisfaction with her relationship with Paul. For Martha, her happiness is to be true to herself, her nature and her heart. “But the main problem, life’s central predicament, was, how did you know your own heart? How did you know what your nature was?” (226) Martha “makes attempt at discovering herself in a relationship with Paul but she realizes that in that relationship she is not true to herself, whereas she also feels that it seems impossible to identify her true self” (Mättner 9).

In this part, a little girl abandoned by her father is crowned a successful woman with great career and love, but this coronation is temporary as the clown becomes the King only at the carnival, when back to the reality, the clown returns to the lower status. In the end, Martha is forced to leave the Theme Park because her failure of chairing the enterprise, and finally the elderly Martha is decrowned a villager in the dilapidated Anglia. Anglia is a pre-industrial, pre-technological and rural society that symbolizes collapsing Old England in 2040. It represents people's desire to return to the past and nostalgia for the tradition and real past. Inhabitants in Anglia keep away from the rapid development of modern society and come back to the former agricultural society. When Martha prepares to back to Anglia, she "had retained her Old English passport, and also secretly paid taxes" (250), which demonstrates that Martha wanted to go back to find real self-identity by staying close to the past rural. However, this is not the ideal rural England that Martha has longed for. The Old England is just another simulacrum as the Theme Park, there exists no reality, all the villagers change their names and occupations so as to have a new start. Nünning points to "the negative sides of village life, such as prying and xenophobia" (Nünning 71). Everything makes her tired and disgusted, and the line between the reality and illusion is still blurred. In the end, Martha realizes that there doesn't exist real identity, and "for all a lifetime's internal struggling, you were finally no more than what others saw you as. That was your nature, whether you liked it or not" (259).

3. Pitman: Contrary Images and Unreal Identity

As a business tycoon, Sir Jack Pitman receives extensive attention and there are different opinions about him, "some ascribed to him a deep, instinctive intelligence" (56), "others found him a brute and unreflecting junction between the money, ego and lack of conscience" (56), and someone else sees him as "a financial illusionist who for that brief and necessary moment conceived you that the money was real and before your eyes" (57). These diverse comments about Pitman's images provide contrary features that affects Sir Jack's self-recognition and identity. As Bakhtin suggests, "all these images of carnival are dualistic; they unite within themselves poles of change and crisis, birth and death, blessing and curse, abuse and praise, old and young, top and bottom, backside and face, wisdom and stupidity. Very characteristic for carnival thinking is this paired-image, chose their contrasts or for their similarities" (Bakhtin, Rabelais and his world 126). That is to say, Carnival makes people own two contrary characteristics in that people behave differently in different roles.

Sir Jack Pitman is crowned an ardent patriot who saves the declined England and try to rebuild "Englishness". In order to recuperate past glories of British Empire, the entrepreneur Pitman decides to make a miniature version of England, a perfect replica on the Isle of Wight which contains all significant elements of English identity, and sell traditional culture and products to other nations as their future. On top of that, he "tries to mound himself in the vein of the perfect high-ranking Englishman" (Berberich 172), wearing only England-made clothes and shoes as a patriot: "His tweed deerstalker, hunter's jacket, cavalry twills, gaiters, hand-crafted doe-skin boots, and fell-walker's stave. All made in England, of course: Sir Jack was a patriot in his private moments too" (42). From the description of Pitman, we can feel a bit of satire Barnes uses. Pitman tries hard to present himself with patriotism and Englishness, "but we know it well that identity is much more complex and layered, and it cannot be reduced to a set of certain traits let alone can be restricted to one's appearance" (Miskei 6). Besides, Mättner claims that "Sir Pitman is not really a patriot, since he accepts England's decline, which is to a great extent caused by his project" (Mättner 10).

In the process of building the Theme Park, a survey conducted by the Concept Developer lists fifty Quintessences of Englishness that people all over the world associate with the word "England", involving both positive and negative items such as the Royal Family, Big Ben, Robin Hood, and the class system, snobbery, hypocrisy, emotional frigidity. Sir Jack crosses off negative items in that they do not fit the perfect picture of Englishness he wants to express in order to attract tourists around the world. Nünning suggests that "Barnes exposes the onesideness that characterizes many contemporary versions of Englishness, which overwhelmingly locate 'true' Englishness in the past" (Nünning 65).

As his grand feat of saving British international image is permeated with evasion and fabrication, his national heroic image has been questioned.

Sir Pitman's crossing off is not strange in that "the national identity is artfully composed in order to save people's needs, just as personal identity is a fabrication of the facets which one wishes to present to others" (Miskei 7). Consciously or unconsciously, people tend to present positive side to others and hide the negative characteristics which are displeasing for us. On the one hand, Pitman is a patriot with perfect Englishness and successful business; on the other hand, involved in the blurry zone of the reality and illusion, Pitman makes efforts to quest for reality and the real self. He has doubts about the authenticity of himself and the world: "What is real" (31), "Are you real" (31) and "Is my name...real" (32). The answer for these questions is no. In his opinion, things like money are more real than the people, "I could have you replaced with substitutes, with... simulacra, more quickly than I could sell my beloved Brancusi. Is money real? It is, in a sense, more real than you" (31). Therefore, this novel specially depicts processes of how Pitman seeks authentic experience by pretending as an infant.

"The ceremonial of the ritual of decrowning is counterposed to the ritual of crowning: regal vestments are stripped off the decrowned king, his crown is removed, the other symbols of authority are taken away, he is ridiculed and beaten" (Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics 125). However, Sir Jack is not literally beaten. His high social status is taken away, his authority vanishes and he is decrowned an eccentric person with infantile sexual gratification in Auntie May's house. By playing as a three-month-old baby named "Victor", Sir Jack experiences authentic babying nurture including changing nappy, feeding, rubbing and doing poo. According to Freudian theory, the id consists of different primitive desires and instincts, and fulfillment of primitive desires can manifest in babyhood. These nurture activities make Sir Jack release primitive desires so that he can gain a true feeling. He views Auntie May's house as a duplicated world, and this closed space allows him to free himself from all constraints and enjoy the authentic baby-like experience. Even though, it is obvious that Pitman's playing as a baby cannot help him feel the reality. Individual participation in activities is accompanied by self-awareness. Barnes deliberately ignores the analysis of Pitman's self-consciousness and only describes his physical feeling, which reflects his unreal self-cognition that he can obtain real identity through role playing.

4. Backdrop Members: Unreal Role Identity and Self-identification

In the simulacrum "*England, England*", the essential aspects of Englishness are reduced to inoffensive performance, all negative characteristics of Englishness are discarded, and all the major historical figures and events are modified to meet the needs of worldwide tourists, which is Martha called "the repositioning of myths for modern time" (148). Celebrities in British history and myth including Nell Gwynn, Robin Hood, the King and Queen are decrowned to adapt to the anticipation of the audience and to the spirit of the new century.

The Backdrop members are never known by their own names but by those of their roles, thus they are stuck in their role models and confuse real with fictional identities. Nell Gwynn is a seventeenth-century orange seller who becomes the most popular of Charles II's mistresses at a relatively young age, referring to herself as "the Protestant whore", and has two illegitimate sons of the King. In order to meet the modern moral standards, this role needs to be transformed: "Perhaps a little massaging, to bring her into line with third millennium family values" (93). As a result, the committee decides to "cancel the background of adultery, pedophilia and three-in-a-bed sex" (Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes* 109), rewriting her history as Martha suggests: "We could make her older... lose the children, lose the other mistresses, and lose the social and religious background. Then she could be a nice middle-class girl who ends up marrying the King" (94). The actress also remains this modified role that she is fifteen in this island and she doesn't have to endure indecent behavior and sexual harassment from anyone. Therefore, when the King molests and taunts her, she makes an official complaint against him. "The meanings of the self (as object) are established and assessed in terms of

the meanings of the performances generated by that self (as subject) within the culture of the international situation” (Burke and Donald 85). The actress who impersonates Nell Gwynn thinks she now is a fifteen-year-old girl rather than an adult, a juice seller rather than an educated woman. She accepts the unreal identity in the Theme Park and discards real identity in reality.

Similarly, Project members deem the myth of Robin Hood is “politically incorrect” (Nünning 64) because of its male-dominated feature. As a result, the Official historian Dr Max reminds his colleagues that “one of them—Maid Marian is clearly a certified woman” (148), who married Hood according to the existing incomplete narrative. He also mentions that the name “Robin” is a “sexually ambiguous” and that “Hood” indicates “a garment which is ambisexual” (148), so they can reposition the Hood myth with the consideration of the sexual orientation of the Band and add gays, women and ethnic minorities into the community. “It was a primal myth, repositioned after considerable debate. Band personnel had been realigned with great sensitivity; offensive elements in the scenario— old-fashioned attitudes to wildlife, over-consumption of red meat— had been expunged or attenuated” (222). The essential aspects of characteristics are reduced to depoliticizing and inoffensive performance to adapt to the consumer society. However, these sacred images are decrowned by role actors because they want to subvert bogus roles that meet the need of tourists and standards of modern society. So, they gradually begin to exchange representation for dangerous actuality. They hunt their own food in the parks and steal vegetables from the back gardens. The reason of their atavistic behavior is that the role players not only involve themselves in their fictional work environment, but also gradually obsess with their inauthentic role identities. They mistakenly parallel unreal role performance with real self-identity and mix up the difference between the authentic and the imitation. There is a typical narrative of the King and Queen Denise who are different from other role players. Their identities and social status are real and now they are obliged to replenish their diminished grandeur by performing in the Theme Park as they sign contract with the Theme Park. On the one hand, it is clear that Their Majesties regard their duties with disdain: “There’d been a script meeting at the Palace that morning and he’d practiced his lines with Denise as they were waiting to take off. She’d nearly peed herself. She was a real best mate, Denise. But what was the point in paying good money if the audience didn’t get it?” (160) The Royal Family are concerned about secular interests rather than people’s expectations. They appear to weave and simile to tourists because they “appreciate the cash fee that accompanies each balcony appearance” (179). On the other hand, the Royal Family do not distinguish myth from reality. When Martha warns the King to obey executive instructions on the Isle of Wight, he shouts that he is always the king anyway, anywhere and everywhere. Ironically, he is the King by contract and by permission on this island. Therefore, if he disobeys an executive order, he will be decrowned by the manager in the Theme Park. After presenting modified roles of the Royal Family, Barnes satirizes the interchangeability of the reality and illusion and personal fuzzy self-recognition.

In “England, England”, the members of Backdrop eventually forget that they are playing roles and gradually obsess with their invented role identities. In the course of what Michael Wood refers to as “reality crises, clashes between the simulacrum and desire, or vertiginous excesses of identification” (Wood 57), the actors completely identify themselves with their role models that they become the original.

5. Conclusion

The link between unauthentic cognition of identity and unreal role performance reflects Barnes’ postmodernism which doubts all traditional concepts and accepts indeterminacy. Postmodern writers question the authenticity, doubting whether there is objective and absolute reality. *England, England* explores the relationship between memory, role performance and authenticity, and questions the construction of identity through memory and history. Barnes not only concerns the dilemma of pursuing real individual’s identity in the postmodern, but also reveals how hyper-real world threaten people’s real living conditions and exacerbate crisis of personal identity. The characters in this novel

are stuck in the simulacrum and perplexed by personal identity. For Martha, uncertain and artificial childhood memory has a major impact on her whole life, which hinders her construction of complete self-identity and her sense of reality. She yearns for reality, pursue the reality, but cannot confirm what is reality after three roles changing. “The certainty of personal identity depends on authentic self-cognition” (Li 47). In order to seek the truth, the members in the Theme Park mistakenly equate simulacrum world with real society, resulting in losing real self-cognition and hindering the construction of personal identity. According to Barnes, *England, England* is “a letter to my own country at the turn of the millennium” (Guignery, History in question 70). Barnes ironically criticizes blurred identities in order to arouse people’s reflection on the personal and national identity.

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