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The Making of Nation and National Identity: A Study of Early English Novels

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Abstract

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were a particularly seminal phase in British history in determining ideologies of repression and representation, aggression and appropriation, commerce and colonization. The political and cultural contact with the outside world gave rise to the need to define the self. This required a serious rethinking and refiguring of the inclusion and exclusion of people and ideology within the ambit of the nation. At the same time, the emergence of the novel coinciding with the rise of imperialism was not an accident, but rather a deliberate and complex ideological configuration between narratives and nation making. Novels, especially because of their intrinsic wide spectrum of representation, became the ideal medium to depict cultural and national identities. The area of my study focuses on a period in history, which witnessed a revolutionary growth in novel-writing that again simultaneously coincided with the formation of the greatest empire on Earth—The British Empire. The paper will attempt to look at the early novels of this period, and the role they played in constructing a national prototype of ‘Englishness’ and the extent to which they have succeeded in perpetuating a national vision for its readers. The co-relation, or rather the interrelation between literature and nation building is a two-way interdependent process in shaping the thinking of a people. The focus of the paper would be to see how complex issues of differences and otherness were negotiated in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century British narratives to project the national prototype of the noble and civilized Englishman divinely ordained to rule over the rest of the world.

Keywords: *national identity, novel, Englishness*