A TRANSNATIONAL AND TRANSCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE:
TRANSCENDING THE “ENGLISHNESS” OF ENGLISH
LITERATURE

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This essay aims to address the question of how some of the fiction that is being written in England today is more than ever indebted to a transnational and transcultural perspective that reflects the current multicultural map of English identity(ies). I will argue that the panorama of English literature today is very markedly a global one, which destabilizes both fixed notions of English identity and accepted notions of national literatures. Thus, as is proposed in this article, if we want to continue to address the question of English literature from a national perspective, we would better redefine the limits of this nation-based approach, so as to include a more widespread notion of what is meant by the “English” in the phrase “English Literature” today. The essay focuses on three contemporary novels, Hanif Kureishi’s The Buddha of Suburbia, Zadie Smith’s White Teeth and Monica Ali’s Brick Lane, in order to discuss the issues proposed.

On “Englishness” and “being English”
In her Introduction to The Oxford Book of English Short Stories, A.S. Byatt explains her choice of the word “English” in the title of her anthology as indicating that readers will not find in it the usual suspects – Joyce, Mansfield, James, Spark, Stevenson, Conrad – for these authors are not, strictly speaking, English. The tone of the text is rather perplexing, for it elaborates extensively on the qualities of Englishness. As we read on we find the author complaining about the contemporary attitude for despising everything English:

There is a reluctance to think about Englishness. The English are what other English-speakers define themselves against. They are seen as imperialist, insular, nostalgic for merrie England, class-ridden, complacent. There is even a hinted feeling that to think about Englishness might lead to racism or xenophobia. It is not quite nice to think about being English.1

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This statement is to be understood in the context of a growing awareness both of the different regional variations of which the term “British” is composed (Irish, Scottish, Welsh, English) and of the global character of English literature or literatures in English.

The task of ascribing a single nationality to some of the canonical writers of English Literature has always met with some difficulty. “Eng Lit” has always encompassed not only people that were born in England, but also many others that were born elsewhere, be it in Ireland, Scotland or Wales, be it in New Zealand (Katherine Mansfield), the Caribbean (Jean Rhys), South Africa or any other English-speaking country in the world, with the exclusion, perhaps, of the United States. Even the task of separating English from American authors may sometimes be a thorny business if we think of Henry James or T.S. Eliot. Still, A.S. Byatt’s detailed explanation of the characteristics of Englishness that authorize her version of the English short story remains a curious undertaking at a time when “Eng Lit”, or a contemporary version of it, is increasingly a transnational institution. As Dominic Head asserts in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*, the idea of a national identity, besides being problematic – except perhaps in a postcolonial context – has suffered considerable revision after the post-war years.

Thus, between a more traditional re-emergence of the notion of nation and the thoughtful re-invention of a British national identity, we can see a third position gaining ground, “a kind of post-nationalism built on reappraised symbols and traditions that implicitly acknowledges the mongrelized nature of most British identities”.² We ought to mention, though, that A.S. Byatt is the first to be at odds with her own choice of topic, both because she is painstakingly aware that the English are not, probably, the first-hand choices for such an anthology and that it is extremely difficult to define Englishness as such: however hard she tried, she ends up with the conclusion that “The English are hard to sum up”.³

The transnational quality of contemporary English literature is displayed in the titles or sub-titles of recent companions, critical anthologies or English literary histories. Beginning with the volume *Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Fiction*,⁴

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⁴ A. Robert Lee, *Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Fiction,*