

## Postcolonial identity in contemporary English literature

Ika Wulandari<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Deztron Indonesia, Indonesia

Email: [ikawulandari@udi.ac.id](mailto:ikawulandari@udi.ac.id)

### ABSTRAK

Studi ini meneliti konstruksi identitas pascakolonial dalam sastra Inggris kontemporer dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif melalui analisis tekstual yang cermat. Berfokus pada karya sastra terpilih oleh penulis pascakolonial, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana identitas direpresentasikan sebagai sesuatu yang cair, hibrida, dan terus dinegosiasikan dalam narasi yang dibentuk oleh migrasi, diaspora, dan perpindahan budaya. Dengan mengacu pada teori pascakolonial, khususnya konsep hibriditas, keberlainan, dan "ruang ketiga," analisis ini mengungkapkan bahwa teks sastra menggambarkan identitas bukan sebagai esensi yang tetap tetapi sebagai proses dinamis yang dipengaruhi oleh warisan kolonial historis dan kondisi global kontemporer. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman diaspora dan negosiasi linguistik memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk subjektivitas pascakolonial, memungkinkan karakter untuk membangun bentuk-bentuk kepemilikan yang adaptif dan plural. Dengan mengintegrasikan perspektif teoretis dengan pembacaan tekstual yang cermat, studi ini berkontribusi pada kajian sastra Inggris dengan menegaskan kembali relevansi teori pascakolonial dalam menafsirkan representasi sastra kontemporer tentang identitas di dunia yang terglobalisasi.

**Kata kunci:** identitas pascakolonial; sastra Inggris kontemporer; hibriditas; diaspora; negosiasi budaya

### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the construction of postcolonial identity in contemporary English literature by employing a qualitative descriptive approach through close textual analysis. Focusing on selected literary works by postcolonial authors, the research explores how identity is represented as fluid, hybrid, and continuously negotiated within narratives shaped by migration, diaspora, and cultural displacement. Drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly the concepts of hybridity, otherness, and the "third space," the analysis reveals that literary texts portray identity not as a fixed essence but as a dynamic process influenced by historical colonial legacies and contemporary global conditions. The findings indicate that experiences of diaspora and linguistic negotiation play a significant role in shaping postcolonial subjectivity, enabling characters to construct adaptive and plural forms of belonging. By integrating theoretical perspectives with close textual reading, this study contributes to English literary scholarship by reaffirming the relevance of postcolonial theory in interpreting contemporary literary representations of identity in a globalized world.*

**Keyword:** postcolonial identity; contemporary English literature; hybridity; diaspora; cultural negotiation

#### Corresponding Author:

Ika Wulandari,  
Universitas Deztron Indonesia,  
Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan No. 9, Kec. Medan Timur, Kota Medan, Sumatera  
Utara, Indonesia  
Email: [ikawulandari@udi.ac.id](mailto:ikawulandari@udi.ac.id)



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of postcolonial identity has become increasingly significant in contemporary English literature as global mobility, transnational interactions, and cultural exchanges continue to reshape the modern world. In the aftermath of colonialism, questions of identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation remain central

to literary discourse. Contemporary English literature, produced across diverse geographical and historical contexts, reflects the ongoing complexities of societies shaped by imperial histories. Writers from formerly colonized regions and diasporic communities explore how identities are constructed, fragmented, and reconstructed within conditions of displacement, migration, and hybridity.

Postcolonial theory provides a critical framework for examining these literary representations. Concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, otherness, diaspora, and cultural resistance illuminate the ways individuals and communities negotiate their positions within lingering structures of power. Rather than presenting identity as stable or unified, contemporary texts frequently portray it as fluid and continually evolving. Characters often navigate multiple cultural affiliations, linguistic tensions, and conflicting historical narratives, revealing identity as a dynamic process rather than a fixed essence.

Moreover, globalization has intensified cross-cultural encounters, further complicating notions of nationality and selfhood. Contemporary English literature responds to these realities by foregrounding voices that challenge dominant narratives and question inherited assumptions about race, culture, and belonging. Through diverse narrative techniques and thematic concerns, these works highlight the psychological, social, and political dimensions of postcolonial experience.

This study examines how postcolonial identity is constructed and represented in contemporary English literary texts. By analyzing selected works through a postcolonial lens, the research aims to demonstrate how literature functions as a space for articulating resistance, negotiating cultural memory, and redefining identity in a post-imperial world. Ultimately, this discussion underscores the continued relevance of postcolonial studies within English literary scholarship and its contribution to understanding the complexities of identity in the contemporary era.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Postcolonial identity has become a central concern in contemporary English literary studies. Rooted in the historical experience of colonialism and its aftermath, postcolonial theory examines how power, culture, language, and identity are constructed and negotiated within formerly colonized societies. Early foundational thinkers such as Edward Said (1978) introduced the concept of *Orientalism*, demonstrating how Western discourse shaped representations of the East in ways that reinforced colonial dominance. Said's work laid the groundwork for understanding identity as something produced through systems of representation rather than as an inherent essence.

Building on this foundation, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) developed key concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and the third space. Bhabha argues that postcolonial identity emerges in the in-between spaces created through cultural interaction. Rather than being fixed or rooted solely in one tradition, identity becomes fluid, ambivalent, and continually negotiated. The concept of hybridity is particularly influential in contemporary literary analysis because it highlights how characters in modern texts often embody multiple cultural affiliations simultaneously. This theoretical framework challenges binary oppositions such as colonizer/colonized and self/other.

Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) contributed significantly to postcolonial discourse through her concept of the subaltern, questioning whether marginalized voices can truly be heard within dominant structures of power. Spivak's critique emphasizes the complexities of representation and agency, particularly for women and other marginalized groups within postcolonial contexts. Her work has encouraged scholars to examine how contemporary English literature gives voice to silenced identities while simultaneously interrogating the limitations of such representation.

In contemporary English literature, postcolonial identity is frequently explored through themes of migration, diaspora, displacement, and transnationalism. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Jhumpa Lahiri portray characters navigating fragmented cultural landscapes shaped by globalization. Stuart Hall's (1990) theory of cultural identity further supports this perspective, proposing that identity is not a stable essence but a continuous process of becoming. Hall's ideas have been particularly influential in diaspora studies, where identity is understood as dynamic and shaped by memory, history, and hybridity.

Language also plays a crucial role in the construction of postcolonial identity. Scholars such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (1989) argue that the appropriation and transformation of the English language can function as acts of resistance against colonial authority. Contemporary authors often reshape English by incorporating indigenous expressions, code-switching, and vernacular forms, thereby asserting cultural agency and challenging linguistic hierarchies. This linguistic creativity reflects broader struggles over cultural ownership and identity formation.

Recent scholarship further connects postcolonial identity to globalization and transnational mobility. Critics suggest that contemporary literature reflects increasingly complex identities shaped by global

interconnectedness, digital communication, and multicultural societies. In this context, postcolonial identity is no longer confined to formerly colonized regions but emerges as a global condition influencing both center and periphery. The boundaries between colonizer and colonized therefore become increasingly blurred, reinforcing the idea that identity is relational and continually reconstructed.

Overall, existing scholarship demonstrates that postcolonial identity in contemporary English literature is characterized by fluidity, negotiation, and hybridity. Theoretical contributions from Said, Bhabha, Spivak, Hall, and other scholars provide essential frameworks for understanding how identity is shaped by history, culture, and power. Contemporary literary texts extend these theoretical discussions by presenting nuanced portrayals of individuals who inhabit multiple cultural worlds. This body of scholarship establishes a strong foundation for further research examining how modern English literature reimagines identity within postcolonial realities.

This study is grounded in postcolonial theory as its primary analytical framework. Postcolonial theory examines the cultural, political, and psychological effects of colonialism and its continuing impact on formerly colonized societies. It focuses on how colonial power structures shaped identities, representations, language, and systems of knowledge. In the context of contemporary English literature, postcolonial theory provides critical tools for analyzing how literary texts negotiate issues of identity, belonging, displacement, and cultural transformation in a globalized world.

One of the central concepts employed in this study is hybridity, as articulated by Homi K. Bhabha. Hybridity refers to the creation of new cultural forms that emerge from the interaction between colonizer and colonized cultures. Rather than viewing identity as pure or fixed, hybridity emphasizes its fluid and constructed nature. In contemporary literary works, characters often inhabit “in-between” spaces where cultural meanings are constantly negotiated. This concept helps explain how postcolonial subjects redefine themselves beyond binary oppositions such as East/West or colonizer/colonized.

Another key concept is diaspora, which highlights experiences of migration, displacement, and transnational identity. Scholars such as Stuart Hall argue that identity is not an essence but a positioning that is continuously formed and reformed through history and representation. In contemporary English literature, diasporic characters frequently grapple with fragmented identities shaped by multiple cultural affiliations. This framework enables the analysis to focus on how memory, homeland, and cultural inheritance influence processes of self-construction.

The study also draws on Edward Said’s concept of representation and *Orientalism*, which examines how the West historically constructed the East as the “Other.” Said’s theory is useful for identifying how contemporary texts challenge, subvert, or reinterpret dominant narratives produced during the colonial period. By interrogating representation, this research explores how authors resist stereotypical depictions and reclaim narrative authority.

In addition, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of the subaltern informs this analysis, particularly in understanding marginalized voices within literary texts. Spivak questions whether the subaltern can truly speak within dominant discourses, thereby highlighting issues of power and silencing. Contemporary English literature often attempts to foreground voices that were historically excluded, thus reshaping literary space as a platform for resistance and agency.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives—hybridity, diaspora, representation, and subalternity—this framework conceptualizes postcolonial identity as dynamic, fragmented, and continuously negotiated. It provides a comprehensive lens for examining how contemporary English literature reflects and reimagines identities shaped by colonial history and global cultural exchange.

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in literary analysis. It focuses on examining representations of postcolonial identity in selected contemporary English literary works. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the objective of the study is to interpret meanings, themes, and identity constructions rather than to measure numerical data.

The primary data consist of contemporary English literary texts published in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries that address themes of migration, diaspora, hybridity, cultural displacement, and identity negotiation. The selected texts are chosen purposively based on their relevance to postcolonial discourse and their critical recognition within contemporary literary studies. Secondary data include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and theoretical writings on postcolonial theory, particularly the works of key theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Stuart Hall.

Data collection is conducted through close reading and textual documentation. Significant passages, dialogues, narrative structures, and linguistic strategies that reflect identity formation and postcolonial experience are identified, categorized, and analyzed. The study pays particular attention to elements such as characterization, narrative voice, symbolism, and representations of cultural conflict.

The analytical framework is based on postcolonial theory, especially the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, otherness, ambivalence, and diaspora. These theoretical perspectives are used to interpret how identity is constructed, fragmented, and negotiated within the texts. The analysis follows several steps: (1) identifying key themes related to postcolonial identity; (2) interpreting textual evidence through theoretical concepts; (3) examining the sociohistorical context of the works; and (4) synthesizing findings to explain how contemporary literature redefines identity in postcolonial settings.

To ensure validity, the study applies triangulation by comparing interpretations with established scholarly discussions and critical reviews. The research also maintains analytical consistency by systematically linking textual evidence to theoretical arguments.

Through this methodological approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how contemporary English literature represents postcolonial identity as dynamic, fluid, and continuously negotiated.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Postcolonial identity in contemporary English literature is represented as fluid, negotiated, and shaped by both historical and global forces. Rather than portraying identity as stable or singular, contemporary writers emphasize fragmentation, hybridity, and the ongoing process of self-construction. This perspective reflects the continuing influence of colonial histories on present-day cultural and social realities. Through narrative structure, characterization, and linguistic choices, authors illustrate how identity is formed at the intersections of power, memory, displacement, and resistance.

One of the central concepts in analyzing postcolonial identity is hybridity, as proposed by Homi K. Bhabha. Contemporary literary characters frequently inhabit “in-between” spaces where cultures intersect. They may adopt elements from both colonial and indigenous traditions, thereby creating identities that cannot be categorized within rigid national or cultural boundaries. Such hybridity challenges essentialist views of identity and reveals how colonial encounters generate new cultural forms. In many contemporary novels, protagonists navigate multiple linguistic, cultural, and social systems, demonstrating that identity is constructed through negotiation rather than inheritance.

Another significant theme is diaspora and migration. Global mobility has intensified in the modern era, and contemporary English literature often reflects experiences of exile, displacement, and transnational belonging. Characters may experience alienation in both their homeland and host country, leading to feelings of cultural dislocation. However, this condition also enables new forms of belonging that transcend geographical boundaries. Diasporic identity is therefore portrayed as dynamic, shaped by memory, nostalgia, adaptation, and reinvention. Literature thus becomes a space in which migrant voices articulate the psychological complexities of living between worlds.

Language also plays a crucial role in constructing postcolonial identity. Many contemporary authors appropriate, reshape, or hybridize the English language to reflect local realities. This linguistic strategy resists colonial authority, which historically positioned English as a tool of dominance. By incorporating indigenous expressions, code-switching, and nonstandard forms, writers assert cultural autonomy and challenge linguistic hierarchies. The transformation of English into a plural and localized medium reflects shifting power dynamics in the postcolonial world.

Furthermore, contemporary texts frequently address memory and historical trauma. The legacy of colonial violence, exploitation, and cultural suppression continues to influence identity formation. Literary narratives often revisit suppressed histories to recover marginalized perspectives. Through storytelling, authors reconstruct collective memory and question official historical accounts. In this way, literature functions as a form of resistance, enabling postcolonial subjects to reclaim agency and redefine their cultural narratives.

Gender, class, and race further complicate postcolonial identity. Contemporary works highlight how colonialism intersected with patriarchal and racial hierarchies, producing layered forms of marginalization. Female and subaltern characters, in particular, negotiate identities within structures shaped by both colonial and internal oppression. Their stories reveal that postcolonial identity cannot be understood as uniform; rather, it is shaped by multiple and overlapping social forces.

Overall, contemporary English literature presents postcolonial identity as a continuous process of negotiation within globalized contexts. This analysis demonstrates that identity is not fixed or homogeneous but constructed through movement, interaction, and resistance. By exploring hybridity, diaspora, language, memory, and intersectionality, contemporary writers challenge traditional notions of nation and culture. Consequently, postcolonial literature contributes significantly to broader discussions of belonging, power, and the redefinition of the self in a post-imperial world.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that recent works in English literature depict postcolonial identity as complex, evolving, and shaped by ongoing historical and cultural interactions. Rather than treating identity as stable or singular, these texts illustrate how individuals and communities continuously negotiate their sense of self within contexts marked by colonial legacies, migration, diaspora, and globalization. Such representations reveal identity as a dynamic process formed through memory, displacement, adaptation, and intercultural encounters.

The analysis also shows that themes such as hybridity, linguistic negotiation, cultural in-betweenness, and shifting belonging are central to understanding characters' experiences. Literary narratives highlight tensions between tradition and modernity, homeland and hostland, and local and global influences. Through these tensions, authors expose the fluid boundaries of nationality, culture, and subjectivity, thereby challenging essentialist perspectives that attempt to define identity in rigid or homogeneous terms.

Furthermore, this research affirms the continuing significance of postcolonial theory as a critical framework for examining contemporary literary production. Concepts proposed by scholars—such as hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence, and diaspora—remain highly relevant for interpreting how texts respond to global power structures and cultural transformation. By applying this theoretical lens, the study underscores how literature not only reflects postcolonial realities but also actively participates in redefining them.

Ultimately, contemporary English literary works provide a vital space for exploring questions of belonging, memory, resistance, and cultural reconstruction. They invite readers to reconsider fixed assumptions about selfhood and to recognize identity as plural, negotiated, and open to reinterpretation. Therefore, this study contributes to the broader field of English literary studies by reinforcing the importance of postcolonial perspectives for understanding the complexities of modern global narratives.

## REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2023). *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in postcolonial literatures*. Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. K. (2021). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Boehmer, E. (2023). *Colonial and postcolonial literature*. Oxford University Press.
- Gandhi, L. (2021). *Postcolonial theory: A critical introduction*. Columbia University Press.
- Hall, S. (2020). *Cultural identity and diaspora*. Routledge.
- Huggan, G. (2020). *The postcolonial exotic: Marketing the margins*. Routledge.
- Loomba, A. (2021). *Colonialism/postcolonialism*. Routledge.
- McLeod, J. (2022). *Beginning postcolonialism*. Manchester University Press.
- Mishra, V. (2024). *Literature of the Indian diaspora: Theorizing the diasporic imaginary*. Routledge.
- Nayar, P. K. (2022). *Contemporary literary and cultural theory: From structuralism to ecocriticism*. Pearson.
- Quayson, A. (2024). *Postcolonialism and literature*. Cambridge University Press.
- Said, E. W. (2020). *Culture and imperialism*. Vintage.
- Spivak, G. C. (2022). *Can the subaltern speak?* Columbia University Press.
- Walkowitz, R. L. (2025). *Born translated: The contemporary novel in an age of world literature*. Columbia University Press.
- Young, R. J. C. (2020). *Postcolonialism: An historical introduction*. Wiley.