

13. Lecture 13: Contemporary British Literature and Globalization

Duration: 3 hours

Introduction

In the wake of decolonization, mass migration, and digital capitalism, contemporary British literature has been radically transformed by the forces of globalization. No longer confined to insular narratives of nationhood, British literary production in the 21st century unfolds within a transnational cultural economy, where boundaries between the local and the global, the center and the margin, have become increasingly porous. This lecture interrogates how contemporary British writers engage with, resist, and are shaped by global processes; economic, cultural, technological, and migratory.

Globalization, as a condition of interconnectedness, has brought with it the blending, fragmentation, and reconfiguration of cultural identities. British fiction often stages characters who move between geographies, languages, and belief systems; mirroring the globalized realities of contemporary life. At the same time, it grapples with the anxieties of displacement, cultural homogenization, and the commodification of experience. These tensions surface in both form and content: in narrative structures that refuse linearity, in the multiplication of voices, and in themes that reflect the hybrid and contested nature of identity in the global age.

Through an interdisciplinary lens that draws on literary studies, cultural theory, and globalization studies, this lecture explores how authors such as Zadie Smith, Hanif Kureishi, and Ali Smith, among others, have redefined the scope of British fiction. By including a close reading of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*; a novel not British but profoundly relevant, we will also consider the transatlantic resonances of globalization's cultural effects, particularly the saturation of everyday life by media and consumerism.

In doing so, we aim to ask: How has globalization challenged the national framework of British literature? What new forms of storytelling and subjectivity emerge in its wake? And how

does literature itself become a site of negotiation, critique, and reimagination of the global condition?

Part I. Globalization and Contemporary Literature

13.1 Key Concepts: Globalization and Its Cultural Dimensions

Globalization, as a term and phenomenon, denotes the intensification of worldwide social relations that link distant localities in such a way that local events are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. In the context of literature, globalization is not merely an economic or political process but a deeply cultural and aesthetic transformation. It shapes the way stories are written, circulated, and read across borders.

Arjun Appadurai, one of the leading theorists of globalization, identifies several overlapping “scapes”; ethnoscap, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes that shape the flow of culture in a globalized world. He argues that “the central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another” (*Modernity at Large* 43). This tension is deeply embedded in literature produced in post-imperial Britain, which now finds itself both shaping and being shaped by transnational cultural flows.

As a result, contemporary British literature is increasingly transnational. Writers often transcend the traditional boundaries of the nation-state, incorporating narratives of migration, exile, diaspora, and cultural hybridity. Literary critics such as Paul Jay observe that literature in the global age resists being “trapped in the framework of national traditions,” instead “offering more fluid, mobile, and interconnected narratives” (*Global Matters* 8).

13.2 Impacts on British Literature

13.2.1 Multiculturalism and Diasporic Consciousness

One of the most visible effects of globalization on British literature is the rise of multicultural narratives and the centrality of diasporic experiences. Britain’s colonial history and its post-imperial migration flows have transformed its literary landscape. Authors such as Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie, and Hanif Kureishi reflect hybrid identities that challenge notions of cultural purity or national literary canons.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, for instance, explores the lives of first- and second-generation immigrants in London, portraying the city as "a place of intersecting genealogies and overlapping histories" (Gilroy 122). Her characters embody the hybrid realities of postcolonial global Britain, where identity is not inherited but constructed, contested, and fluid.

Rushdie famously claims that "the history of the migrant is a discontinuous history" (*Imaginary Homelands* 277), which aligns with Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space," a space of negotiation and translation in which hybrid identities are formed (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 36). In this regard, contemporary British literature becomes a site of transcultural negotiation, where the local and the global intersect.

13.2.2 Collapse of the Center-Periphery Literary Model

Globalization has also destabilized the center-periphery model that long governed British literary production. No longer does London unilaterally dictate the aesthetics or themes of "English literature." Instead, voices from the former peripheries now reconfigure the center, contributing to a polyphonic literary space where no single perspective dominates.

This decentralization is mirrored in publishing practices and literary institutions. As literary scholar Sarah Brouillette argues, "contemporary literary production has become entangled in global circuits of capital and prestige," where authors often write with an eye toward international markets and prizes (*Literature and the Creative Economy* 5). The Booker Prize shortlist itself, once dominated by English authors, now routinely includes diasporic and global Anglophone voices.

13.3 Representative British Authors and Thematic Shifts

13.3.1 Zadie Smith: London as a Global City

In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith presents London not as a monolithic capital but as a global node; a city shaped by migration, war, colonial residues, and the anxieties of modernity. Her characters, such as Samad Iqbal and Archie Jones, struggle with the disorientation of cultural hybridity, where identities are constantly being redefined by shifting geopolitical currents.

Smith does not offer a romanticized vision of multiculturalism. Rather, she reveals its fractures, contradictions, and tensions. As she writes, "this is the story of a city, of two families,

of beginnings and endings and everything in between” (*White Teeth* 3). The novel is emblematic of literature born in and through globalization, where personal stories echo the larger narratives of empire, diaspora, and transnational belonging.

13.3.2 Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Identity and Neoliberal Culture

In works such as *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Hanif Kureishi portrays the complexities of postcolonial identity in a neoliberal and racially stratified Britain. His characters are neither fully assimilated nor completely alienated, but exist in liminal spaces where culture, sexuality, and class intersect. Globalization, in Kureishi’s fiction, is not merely economic but psychological and existential; a force that reshapes desire, memory, and aspiration.

13.3.3 Ali Smith and David Mitchell: Time, Place, and the Global Imagination

Ali Smith’s *Autumn* and *Spring* engage with Brexit-era anxieties while exploring the temporal and spatial effects of globalization. Her fragmented narrative style mirrors the disruption of linear history and the collapse of national certainty in a globalized world.

Similarly, David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* demonstrates the interconnectedness of human lives across time and space, offering a narrative structure that mimics the networks and flows of globalization. Mitchell’s “cloud” metaphor serves as a parable for global cultural entanglement: “Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies” (*Cloud Atlas* 308).

Part II: Media, Consumerism, and Identity in *White Noise*

13.4 Don DeLillo and Transatlantic Global Culture

Although *White Noise* (1985) is authored by American writer Don DeLillo, the novel serves as a powerful entry point for discussing globalization’s cultural and psychological impact. It is a transnational text; not in its setting, but in its themes and implications. In an age when global flows of media, commodities, and cultural forms shape everyday consciousness, DeLillo’s work offers a searing critique of the epistemological consequences of consumer capitalism and media saturation, which resonate across Anglo-American literary landscapes.

DeLillo, writing during the early ascent of neoliberal globalization, dramatizes a world where identities are not formed through history or self-reflection, but through mass-produced signs, mediated experiences, and commodified fears. While not a British novel, *White Noise* has

deeply influenced global Anglophone fiction, and its preoccupations with hyperreality, simulation, and the death of authenticity are mirrored in many contemporary British narratives.

The text exemplifies what Jean Baudrillard termed “the simulacrum”, where representations no longer refer to reality but instead substitute for it. As Baudrillard argues, in a society dominated by media and images, “It is the map that precedes the territory” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). *White Noise* literalizes this postmodern condition; creating a world where characters live within the logic of simulation, their lives mediated by television, radio, advertising, and pharmaceuticals.

13.5 Thematic Exploration

13.5.1 Media Saturation and the Collapse of Meaning

The omnipresence of media in *White Noise* reflects the saturation of the symbolic order by corporate signs and consumer slogans. Rather than mediating reality, language and media obscure it, leading to a world that is fragmented, distracted, and fundamentally uncertain.

One of the novel’s most famous motifs is the random intrusion of media discourse into everyday life. In an early scene, Jack Gladney describes how “the radio said, ‘Now we will go to the highway, live, for an eyewitness report on the toxic spill.’” The family does not question the source or reliability of this information; it simply becomes part of the white noise of their reality (DeLillo 117). Media is no longer an external entity; it co-produces consciousness.

This aligns with Fredric Jameson's diagnosis of postmodern culture as characterized by “a new depthlessness,” where surface images proliferate, but historical memory and subjective interiority are flattened (*Postmodernism* 9). In *White Noise*, Jack’s identity as a professor of “Hitler Studies” becomes symbolic of this depthlessness; he specializes in historical atrocity yet remains emotionally and ethically detached from it, more concerned with academic branding than moral reckoning.

13.5.2 Consumerism as Ontology

Consumerism in *White Noise* is not merely economic; it becomes ontological. The supermarket scenes are rendered with ritualistic reverence, transforming consumption into a pseudo-religious practice. Jack remarks, “This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a

gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It's full of psychic data" (DeLillo 37). The supermarket, with its aisles of redundant goods and coded signs, functions as a site of manufactured transcendence, offering a sense of order in an otherwise disoriented world.

In this way, DeLillo mirrors the logic of global capitalism, where the circulation of commodities replaces the search for meaning. Characters seek existential consolation not in relationships or reflection but in shopping, media consumption, and pharmacological escape. Babette's addiction to Dylar, a fictional drug that promises to eliminate the fear of death, exemplifies the commodification of psychic life.

This logic is increasingly visible in contemporary British literature as well. In works like Ali Smith's *Autumn*, characters navigate a society overwhelmed by the same aesthetic flattening, commodification of time, and crisis of belief that defines *White Noise*. Smith, like DeLillo, stages a confrontation between ephemeral digital culture and the human need for memory, connection, and ethical depth.

13.6 Comparative Angle: Global Echoes in British Fiction

Although *White Noise* is rooted in the American suburb, its critique of media and consumer culture as agents of identity formation has become global. Contemporary British literature increasingly reflects these same anxieties, as it responds to the erosion of cultural specificity in a global consumer system.

13.6.1 Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

In *White Teeth*, for example, characters live in a London saturated with advertising, fast food, and global brands. The character of Millat Iqbal, who both rebels against and consumes Western pop culture, becomes an emblem of cultural contradiction. As Smith writes, "Millat was a Paki no longer. He was a new breed. A first-generation product of the Great Western Experiment" (*White Teeth* 233). Like Jack and Babette, Millat is shaped by forces larger than himself; a blend of cultural expectations, mass media archetypes, and global commodification.

13.6.2 David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* extends the critique of globalization into the future, imagining a world where language, identity, and ethics are all conditioned by the logic of

transnational corporations. In the dystopian “Nea So Copros” section, the clone-fabricant Sonmi-451 remarks, “To be is to consume. This is the natural order of things” (*Cloud Atlas* 201). Mitchell, like DeLillo, exposes how capitalism naturalizes its structures, shaping not only our economies but our desires, grammars, and ontologies.

Part III. Cultural Identity in the Global Era

13.7 Blending and Fragmentation: Rethinking Identity in Global Literature

In the era of globalization, cultural identity is no longer a stable or self-contained category. Instead, it is increasingly defined by mobility, hybridity, and discontinuity. Literary narratives across the Anglophone world, particularly within British fiction, illustrate the fragmentation of subjectivity under global conditions. The notion of a unified “British identity” has been unsettled by postcolonial migration, diasporic affiliations, and the proliferation of global media, resulting in multiple, intersecting identities that defy traditional nationalist paradigms.

The theoretical framework for understanding this transformation draws heavily on postcolonial and globalization theorists. Stuart Hall argues that identity in the postmodern world is best understood as a matter of “positioning,” not essence, emphasizing that cultural identity is “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 225). In a globalized Britain, then, identity is always in flux, constituted through relations of difference, memory, and displacement.

Contemporary British literature reflects this sense of instability. Writers such as Monica Ali, Kamila Shamsie, and Zadie Smith often present characters whose identities emerge at the intersection of local and global cultures, shaped by both ancestral memory and contemporary pressures. The resulting narratives do not aim for resolution or coherence but instead mirror the fluid, often contradictory experiences of postcolonial and transnational existence.

13.8 Literature as Resistance: Reclaiming Narrative Agency

While globalization often threatens to flatten cultural differences into marketable sameness, literature functions as a critical space of resistance and rearticulation. In contrast to the homogenizing tendencies of global media and commercial culture, postcolonial and diasporic

authors use fiction to assert agency, reclaim silenced histories, and disrupt dominant narratives of identity.

This resistance is often encoded in literary form. Non-linear storytelling, unreliable narrators, code-switching, and multilingual dialogue all serve to defamiliarize the reader, forcing them to reckon with the complexity of cross-cultural experience. As Homi Bhabha contends, the postcolonial subject occupies an interstitial space, the “Third Space”, where meaning is negotiated rather than inherited (*The Location of Culture* 36). It is within this in-between zone that much of contemporary British fiction operates.

13.8.1 Example: Ali Smith’s *Autumn*

Ali Smith’s *Autumn* (2016), set in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum, portrays British identity as fractured, ambiguous, and saturated with historical anxiety. Through its interweaving of contemporary life with 1960s pop art and Renaissance iconography, the novel enacts a temporal and cultural layering that resists linear historical thinking. Smith’s protagonist, Elisabeth, navigates a Britain consumed by nationalist nostalgia, where “All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing” (*Autumn* 8). The sentence encapsulates the novel’s paradoxical depiction of Britain in crisis; a place where identity is both aggressively claimed and deeply uncertain.

Smith deploys fragmented narrative structure to reflect the disjunctions of the contemporary moment, blurring boundaries between past and present, fiction and memory. This form is not just aesthetic but political: it forces readers to question the coherence of national identity in a post-truth, post-EU Britain. Her work exemplifies how literature articulates the affective dimension of globalization; a mix of confusion, nostalgia, and hope.

13.8.2 Example: Zadie Smith and the Performance of Identity

Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) also engages directly with the multiplicity of identity in a global city. Her characters embody a hybrid subjectivity that is neither wholly British nor wholly Other. Irie Jones, the daughter of a Jamaican mother and English father, struggles with her physical appearance, ancestry, and social expectations: “She looked from one brown person to the next, trying to recognize herself in their features. She failed. Nobody looked like her”

(*White Teeth* 222). This moment encapsulates the crisis of self in a society that both celebrates and commodifies multiculturalism.

Yet Smith refuses to present identity as tragic or pathological. Instead, she embraces difference as generative, showing how cultural blending produces new forms of belonging and resistance. Her ironic tone and polyphonic style also subvert dominant cultural scripts, making space for plural voices and alternative genealogies.

13.9 Classroom Close Reading: Global Fragmentation in Literary Language

A key method for analyzing cultural identity in global literature is attentive close reading, particularly of how language reflects and enacts fragmentation. Below are examples for discussion:

- **DeLillo's *White Noise*:** The staccato interruptions of media ("COKE IS IT. PEPSI IS BETTER") mirror the psychic fragmentation of the individual and the colonization of interiority by corporate language (DeLillo 51). The novel performs what Fredric Jameson calls "the cultural logic of late capitalism," where human depth is replaced by "surfaces" (*Postmodernism* 9).
- **Ali Smith's *Autumn*:** Elisabeth's stream-of-consciousness thoughts; "The present tense is where we live. The rest is only memory, prediction, dream" (*Autumn* 36), dramatize the temporal dislocation of living in a post-referendum Britain, where the future is clouded and the past idealized.
- **Zadie Smith's *Code-Switching*:** The novel shifts between English dialects, Creole rhythms, and South Asian-inflected idioms. This linguistic plurality enacts the fragmented, performative nature of postcolonial identity.

These examples demonstrate that form and content in contemporary literature are tightly interwoven; language becomes the site where globalization inscribes itself onto the self.

Conclusion

As we have explored throughout this lecture, contemporary British literature emerges as a dynamic and critical site in which the cultural, psychological, and aesthetic ramifications of globalization are rendered visible and contested. In an age marked by the increasing circulation

of people, commodities, and media, literature not only reflects these transformations but interrogates the conditions that produce them.

From the theoretical reframing of identity as fragmented and performative, to the influence of mass media and consumer culture on the inner lives of characters, the global era challenges the very foundations upon which traditional literary narratives were once built. Writers like Zadie Smith, Hanif Kureishi, Ali Smith, and even transnational interlocutors like Don DeLillo do not offer unified or nostalgic visions of selfhood or nationhood. Rather, they illuminate the tensions of a world in flux; where belonging is multiple, identity is unstable, and meaning is continually negotiated across cultural, linguistic, and economic boundaries.

DeLillo's *White Noise* provides a particularly powerful lens through which to understand the psychic effects of media saturation and commodification, offering parallels that resonate across Anglophone literatures. His portrayal of a reality mediated by corporate language, technology, and death anxiety mirrors concerns voiced by British authors, who similarly grapple with the erosion of historical memory, the simulation of authenticity, and the dislocation of cultural self-understanding in the global present.

Yet, rather than capitulating to these forces, contemporary literature often responds with formal innovation, irony, multiplicity, and resistance. These narrative strategies not only challenge dominant cultural narratives but allow for new imaginaries of self, nation, and community to emerge; ones that are neither purely local nor entirely global, but productively suspended between the two.

Ultimately, the literature of globalization does not merely chronicle the loss of identity or cultural specificity. Instead, it opens space for reconstituting meaning, asserting agency, and articulating the plural, contested identities that define our interconnected world. As readers, our task is to navigate this complexity; not to resolve it, but to listen carefully to the voices it gathers and the questions it compels us to ask.

13.10 Evaluation Task: Critical Essay Assignment

Title: *Globalization, Identity, and the Literary Imagination in Contemporary British Fiction*

Write a critical essay of 1,500–2,000 words in response to the following question:

In what ways does globalization reshape the construction of cultural identity in contemporary British literature? Discuss with close reference to *White Noise* by Don DeLillo and at least one British novel of your choice (e.g., *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, *Autumn* by Ali Smith, *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi).

In your response, consider the following:

- How are characters' identities influenced by media, consumer culture, and transnational dynamics?
- What narrative strategies do authors use to represent cultural hybridity or fragmentation?
- How does the selected literature resist or critique the homogenizing forces of globalization?
- How do theoretical frameworks by critics such as Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, or Arjun Appadurai help unpack the texts?

13.11 Works Cited

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