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978-1-107-08446-9 - Nation and Citizenship in the Twentieth-Century British Novel

Janice Ho

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

### *On Citizenship in Twentieth-Century Britain*

In a widely-publicized speech delivered at the Fabian New Year Conference on 14 January 2006, Gordon Brown, then Chancellor of Exchequer, emphasized the importance of developing a more coherent notion of Britishness. Arguing that Britishness is founded “not on ethnicity or race,” Brown proceeds to define national identity in terms of a genealogy of political liberalism and citizenship that has shaped the nation’s past and institutions: Britishness could “lay claim to the idea of liberty”; to the responsibilities of “‘active citizenship,’ [of being a] ‘good neighbour,’ [of] civic pride and the public realm”; and to the aspiration of a fairness that was not just a “formal equality before the law” but a “richer equality of opportunity.”<sup>1</sup> When Brown further asserts that a “commitment to the British values of liberty, responsibility and fairness also means taking citizenship seriously,” Britishness has been made altogether synonymous with a specifically liberal ideal of citizenship. This slippage is evidenced by the fact that the values he celebrates – individual liberty, civic responsibility, and democratic equality – are not unique to Britain and are found and cherished just as ubiquitously in other liberal-democratic states. In Brown’s speech, then, Britishness is underpinned by the universal formulas of citizenship and not by cultural particularities, even as he paradoxically claims to sketch out a distinctive British identity.

Brown’s desire to strengthen national identity is framed as a response to the sociopolitical and cultural challenges faced by Britain in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – among them, Britain’s “relationship with Europe, America and the rest of the world”; “the shape of [Britain’s] public services”; and “the debate about asylum and immigration and about multiculturalism and inclusion.” The pressures of globalization and transnationalism, the increasing retrenchment of the welfare state, and the growing presence of ethnic and cultural minorities, he suggests, can be confidently negotiated only through the consolidation of the “shared values that bind us together and give us common purpose.” Brown’s appeal

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to the citizenship ideals of the rights of liberty and equality, on one hand, and the responsibilities of the good citizen, on the other, is precisely one such attempt at delineating these “shared values.” Yet, far from acting as a stabilizing force, citizenship and its attendant rights and responsibilities have historically been a key site of contests over the question of national belonging: of who should be included in the nation-state and the terms of such inclusion. The longstanding struggles over the meanings of citizenship – for instance, the difference between negative and positive liberties; the character of the responsible citizen; the nature of political subjectivity and the scope of political action; the conflict between universal equality and differentiated group identities; the gap between formal and substantive equality – suggest that citizenship functions less as a panacea to the fragmentation of the nation-state and more as the ground on which struggles about the nation-state and its constituent members are enacted. To put it differently, Brown mistakenly reads citizenship as the solution to the contemporary crises beleaguering the nation-state, when citizenship is more accurately seen as the sociopolitical index of such crises.

Two interrelated points evident in Brown’s speech form the central focus of this study: first, although Brown uses “Britishness” as the category through which he describes national identity, Britishness is misleadingly conflated with liberal conceptions of citizenship whereby the tenets of individual liberty, political sovereignty, and democratic equality are seen as the main attributes of the nation-state. *Nation and Citizenship in the Twentieth-Century British Novel* explores novelistic representations of the different historical struggles that redefined citizenship in twentieth-century Britain and the political and national imaginaries emerging out of these struggles. By focusing on citizenship, I argue for an alternative paradigm through which we can understand the constitution of the nation-state, one conceptually distinct from the ethno-cultural lens of Englishness through which national identity is usually discussed. The idea of citizenship draws instead on a political tradition of liberal universalism – a tradition in which Brown’s address is clearly rooted – that had to be reconstructed in different ways in the face of the gender-, class-, and race-based struggles for equal citizenship that were increasingly visible in twentieth-century Britain. How citizenship, both as a form of political selfhood and as the shape of a larger national community, was aesthetically re-envisioned in the twentieth-century British novel is the subject of this book.

Second, Brown raises the question of citizenship at the precise moment when a range of socially and politically charged conflicts, from

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the breakdown of welfare provision to the rise of multiculturalism, are besetting Britain. His turn to citizenship reflects how the meaning of citizenship is the very object at stake in these conflicts. In this book, I read citizenship as a locus of political contests, one whose definitions become particularly fraught during moments of national anxieties and upheavals. Brown's desire to codify what British citizenship should look like is significant less for the substance of his claims, and more for the way it symptomatically reveals how different sociopolitical, economic, and cultural pressures have destabilized the meanings of citizenship such that Brown feels compelled to secure them. His speech is part of a larger growing preoccupation with questions of citizenship and national identity in Britain, evinced most explicitly in the official integration of citizenship studies into the secondary school curriculum in 2002. But these invocations of citizenship and pedagogical responses as a means of mediating national concerns are far from new. For instance, H.G. Wells's 1914 essay "The Ideal Citizen" – which sought to draw a blueprint for the modern citizen who will possess "a sense of the state," who will treat his wife "as his equal," and who "will not be a fat or emaciated person" – refracts prevailing concerns in the Edwardian era, such as the growing role of state intervention in the lives of citizens, the struggle for female enfranchisement, and the quasi-eugenic obsession with national health and fitness.<sup>2</sup> To read the changing meanings of citizenship is thus also to read the conflicts that reshaped twentieth-century Britain.

Since citizenship is an institution perpetually subject to contestations, the object around which national exigencies are invariably organized, I turn to the novels of seven major British authors – E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, Sam Selvon, Buchi Emecheta, Salman Rushdie, and Monica Ali – to argue that literary and cultural spheres act as symbolic sites where such contestations are staged. The novel, a genre preoccupied with the relationship between the protagonist and the social contexts in which he or she exists, is a singularly apt vehicle for charting the vicissitudes of citizenship, a concept that likewise denotes the relationship between the individual citizen and the national collective. Transformations of citizenship in the political domain find their counterpart, I suggest, in textual strategies that represent new forms of citizenship and new political modalities. The book is structured around a series of case studies focusing on particular moments of sociopolitical change and crisis during which struggles over citizenship are thrown up in especially sharp relief. In that respect, my goal here is less to produce a comprehensive genealogy of twentieth-century British citizenship – a project well beyond the scope

of a single study – and more to analyze the multiple and diverse ways in which the literary realm has intervened in reconstructing its meanings at historically fraught conjunctures. My readings of the texts studied herein show how the dilemmas faced by a liberal legacy of political citizenship were also acute literary preoccupations in the twentieth-century British novel: for instance, how were national communities depicted in ways that eschewed the particularities of race and ethnicity for more democratic forms of belonging? What aesthetic tropes were deployed to express emergent political subjectivities, such as the female citizen, the social citizen, or the immigrant citizen? In what ways were representational challenges to state interpellations of good citizenship articulated? How did novels bridge socioeconomic divisions to imagine a political community of equal citizens, the “deep, horizontal comradeship” that Benedict Anderson has argued is constitutive of the national imaginary?<sup>3</sup> How did texts map the shifting boundaries between state, society, and the citizen? These are the central questions confronting liberal modes of citizenship that will recur time and again in these chapters. Before going into the specifics of my readings, I turn first to a discussion of the conceptual frames on which my analyses are built.

### **English Particularities, Universal Citizenship, and the Legacies of Liberalism**

Scholarship on the production of English national identity has been rich and abundant in the last two decades, with Simon Gikandi’s *Maps of Englishness* (1996), Ian Baucom’s *Out of Place* (1999), Jed Esty’s *A Shrinking Island* (2004), Wendy Webster’s *Englishness and Empire, 1939–1965* (2005), and Peter Kalliney’s *Cities of Affluence and Anger* (2007) as the most influential monographs shaping the field. These studies have uniformly read the nation in terms of a cultural identity of Englishness – an identity never free from ethnic or racial inflections – that is seen to be reciprocally determined by the structures of empire. Gikandi’s inaugural exploration of “the ways in which the idea of an English identity has been transformed by colonial culture” remains the central paradigm informing subsequent analyses elaborating on the multiple and complex imbrications between nation and empire.<sup>4</sup> Although such an avenue of inquiry has proved immensely fruitful, this exclusive concern with Englishness has occluded alternative frames through which the constitution of the nation-state and the incorporation of its members might be understood. In this study, I instead take the political concept of citizenship – its institutions, practices, and cultures – as

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the basis for thinking about how national democratic communities were imagined in twentieth-century Britain and how marginalized groups could argue for their inclusion in the nation-state. In doing so, I seek to shift the focus from questions of identity – the making of the (imperial) English subject and national culture – to questions of politics, that is, to how the rights and responsibilities of citizenship are respectively claimed and imposed in different discursive domains and to how the nation-state as body politic is constituted in novelistic representations.

The conceptual distinction between Englishness as an ethno-cultural identity and citizenship as a political status can be illustrated through Wyndham Lewis's remarks on the differences between British and American versions of citizenship in *America and Cosmic Man* (1948). He states, "You cannot make yourself an Englishman really by signing a piece of paper. You become 'British.' It is legally and contractually the same thing; but I am speaking realistically." By contrast, when one becomes an American citizen, one becomes a full-fledged American, just "as if your forebears had been with [George] Washington at Valley Forge."<sup>5</sup> Lewis's distinction between an Englishman and a British citizen would be repeated two decades later to much public notoriety by Enoch Powell, with his claim, in the face of postwar immigration by colonial subjects, that "[t]he West Indian or Asian does not, by being born in England, become an Englishman. In law he becomes a United Kingdom citizen by birth; in fact he is a West Indian or an Asian still."<sup>6</sup> These near-identical statements suggest that the key difference between Englishness and citizenship is the insuperable barrier of race. Prior studies of Englishness have sought to destabilize this opposition by showing the constitutive role of the colonies in the fashioning of Englishness, rendering assertions of cultural and racial purity unsustainable. But if Powell implies that citizenship is merely a formal and nominal affiliation to the nation-state, this is not the case for Lewis, as his fuller remarks make clear. Lewis and Powell's statements appear equivalently racist, yet Lewis could nevertheless declare in the same breath that "racial bigotry" was something "the Englishman, like the American, sets his face against."<sup>7</sup> His claim rests on what he sees as the universalism of British citizenship:

British citizenship is hard-boiled: pseudo-Roman. You could become, until the start of the late war, a British subject for ten pounds. You neither had to be able to read or write, nor to speak the English language particularly well. Just make yourself understood. Like Rome, Great Britain in the past spread its great tolerant wing over all those, irrespective of color, creed, or tongue, who possessed forty bucks and a clean collar.

The “hard-boiled” nature of British citizenship distinguishes it from the assimilationist drive of America where the cult of citizenship assumes a sacralizing force for binding the nation together, unlike Britain’s pragmatic approach in the face of an empire constituted by diverse nationalities and cultures. The Americans “have something *more* than nationality. In its place they have what amounts almost to a religion; a ‘way of life.’ It is one of the most important spiritual phenomena in the world today.” Given his fascist sympathies, Lewis finds the unifying force of American citizenship seductive; but his observations imply that the contrast between Britain and the United States – between the immigrant who cannot become an Englishman and the immigrant who can be integrated as fully American – is not meant to oppose a racist Britain to an inclusive America. Instead, the idea that “you cannot make yourself an Englishman . . . by signing a piece of paper” speaks less of a racial chasm and more of a liberal pluralism in which British citizenship is strategically decoupled from the ethnic and cultural identity of Englishness, allowing various “color[s], creed[s], or tongue[s]” to coexist within the parameters of the British state, unlike the uniform singularity of American citizenship. In short, one cannot – but also need not – become English to be a British citizen.

Lewis’s analysis of British citizenship cannot be read as historically accurate in any sense: it is not just that he confuses subjecthood, a status extended throughout Britain’s imperial territories, with citizenship, a status that did not have legal basis until the passing of the 1948 British Nationality Act. The distinction between subject and citizen is an important issue that I will return to presently; bracketing that for now, Lewis’s idealizations of the “great tolerant wing” of Britain ignores the myriad immigration controls enacted by Britain, beginning with the 1905 Aliens Act and continuing throughout the century, which belie this liberal universalism in practice. His remarks are useful not for their historical accuracy, but for the way they illuminate a distinction between the inclusiveness of “hard-boiled” British citizenship and the exclusiveness of English nationality as different possible forms of affiliation to the nation-state. The racialization of Englishness has made it a longstanding vehicle of discrimination and an unpopular nomenclature among immigrants of color for describing their national identities: Bernie Grant, a black council leader and the MP from Tottenham in the late 1980s, declared that it “would stick in my throat to call myself English.”<sup>8</sup> Britishness might be invoked as the more inclusive category, but as a cultural designation, its tendency to be assimilated with Englishness in common parlance leaves it tarred with the same racial brush. Interviews carried out by *The Parekh Report* on “the

future of multi-ethnic Britain” in 2000 featured respondents who equally repudiated such an identity: “No matter what colour you are, if you’re not white, you’re not British.”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, if Britishness can denote a geopolitical universality – Lewis’s capacious “British citizenship” – it does so by virtue of describing the formal “membership of a single imperial system” which allowed “the first migrants [to arrive] with British passports” as citizens of both Britain and the larger Commonwealth.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Britishness turns inclusive when the term is evacuated of ethno-cultural content and made to signify the liberal principles of citizenship, as we saw in Gordon Brown’s speech, such that it can encompass multiple cultures. The semantic imprecision of the term allows it to function alternately as a synonym for Englishness and citizenship, the key opposition structuring Lewis’s comments.

Whereas Englishness is tied to a cultural particularity irredeemably linked with race and ethnicity, the universalism of citizenship offers a different vocabulary for understanding one’s incorporation into the nation-state unbounded by prescriptions of identity. Jürgen Habermas has argued for the importance of maintaining the distinction between citizenship and nationality, *demos* and *ethnos*. Insisting that “[c]itizenship was never conceptually tied to national identity,” he notes that the etymology of the term “nation” – derived from *natio* – designates pre-political communities linked by ethnic descent, tribal allegiances, and common cultures that had not yet organized themselves into larger political associations which could transcend these particularities. In contrast, “the nation of citizens does not derive its identity from some common ethnic and cultural properties, but rather from the *praxis* of citizens who actively exercise their civil rights.” By claiming that citizenship is defined not in terms of who one is but in terms of what one does, Habermas outlines a procedural mode of citizenship that is, in his view, most effectively realized in a deliberative democracy where citizens participate in a pluralist public sphere through rational argument and debate. Citizenship rests on formal institutions and instruments of public communication and not on substantive ideas of collective identity, whether racial, ethnic, or cultural.<sup>11</sup> Habermas does not repudiate the importance of the cultural politics of identity – what Charles Taylor calls “the politics of recognition” – but he does affirm a reading of citizenship as a function of a common political culture superseding other cultural lifeworlds.<sup>12</sup> A commitment to the polity for Habermas is thus abstractly founded on “constitutional patriotism” and not shared identity.

Habermas’s attempts to disentangle citizenship from nationality, political from national culture, are neither new nor unique. Étienne Balibar

has also called for a “notion of citizenship which breaks with the sacrosanct equation of citizenship and nationality.”<sup>13</sup> And the opposition between civic and ethnic nationalisms had been articulated as far back as 1882, in Ernest Renan’s “What is a Nation?”, where he defined the nation as “a daily plebiscite.”<sup>14</sup> To be sure, the two categories have intertwined in practice, with the legal statutes of citizenship commonly enacted on racialized assumptions. According to Hannah Arendt, the difficulty of separating citizenship and nationality inheres in the form of the nation-state itself, since its inception saw “the state [being] partly transformed from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation” – a “perversion” that gives rise to nationalism, a sentiment confusing state with nation, the citizen with the national.<sup>15</sup> These conflations have led to semantic and analytical ambiguities because definitions of citizenship, legal and otherwise, have always incorporated agendas aimed at preserving the racial, ethnic, or cultural purities of a nation. These empirical instrumentalizations of citizenship are undeniable, but it remains important to preserve a normative conception of citizenship as a political status, a way of imagining community based on the universal principles of the Enlightenment that is distinct from the cultural specificities of national identity. Nor is this conception a rarefied ideal, divorced from historical reality. Instead, I am interested in tracing the material effects that the liberal principles of citizenship can have – and have had – on organizing the terms of inclusion and exclusion in twentieth-century Britain. Stuart Hall and David Held put it thus: “[t]he issues around membership – who does and who does not belong – is where the *politics* of citizenship begins.”<sup>16</sup> Citizenship is the intersection at which a variety of struggles have converged, the instrument through which different groups, from ethnic immigrants to women to the working classes, have politicized their demands and sought to alter the terms and scope of national membership. The universalism of the concept, unlike the particularities of Englishness, is what allows such demands to be made. Benedict Anderson has taught us that all communities are imagined, a fictiveness that is not the same as fictitiousness: “[c]ommunities,” he writes, “are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”<sup>17</sup> Citizenship enables a “style” of imagining community that differs from a community imagined through the prism of Englishness. The former foregrounds the universal fields of political access, individual rights, and socioeconomic (in)equities; the latter, the formation of particular identities and cultural practices.

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Citizenship is a concept originating from classical times – from the Greek *polites* and the Roman *civis*, members of the *polis* and the *res publica* respectively – but, in its modern incarnation, citizenship is a legacy of political liberalism, especially as marked by its historical watersheds and founding documents: the proto-liberal 1688 Glorious Revolution and the English Bill of Rights; the 1776 American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence; and the 1789 French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.<sup>18</sup> The principle of universality inherent in citizenship – that all human beings are innately free and equal and not subject to received hierarchies or absolutist authority – is its most distinctive feature. Based on this premise, individuals in a polity are to be recognized as equal citizens with the same rights and obligations, irrespective of their religious beliefs, race, ethnicity, gender, or class. To state this commonplace is already to see the incommensurability between citizenship’s theoretically inclusive liberal universalism and its concrete historical exclusions, a contradiction that has been subject to trenchant scrutiny for a long time. Immanuel Wallerstein best exemplifies this response when he argues that, far from being inclusive, modern citizenship produced a series of binaries between those deemed fit for citizenship and those not: between “bourgeois and proletarian, man and woman, adult and minor, breadwinner and housewife, majority and minority, White and Black, European and non-European, educated and ignorant . . . and of course the ur-category which all of these others imply – civilized and barbarian.” The universal rights of citizenship, he maintains, are nothing more than “a linguistic mirage, an oxymoron.”<sup>19</sup> Wallerstein’s stance encapsulates the ideological critiques that have aimed at unmasking the hegemonic particularities – bourgeois individualism, phallocentrism, Eurocentrism, or heteronormativity – embedded in citizenship’s ostensible universalism.<sup>20</sup> If citizenship was for a long time restricted to a small class of white male property-owners, this exclusion may speak less of historical contingency and more of a constitutive structure of exclusion within liberalism itself. Yet, in the past decade, such ideological critiques have been tempered by renewed revaluations of the legacies of liberalism and its associated virtues – cosmopolitanism, universalism, critical distance, rational argument, and aesthetic evaluation.<sup>21</sup> Following Jürgen Habermas’s defense of the “unfinished project of modernity,”<sup>22</sup> a variety of critics – especially Amanda Anderson, who, in the words of Kate Flint, has “done the most to bring the term ‘liberalism’ back into contention as a term of critical importance in literary studies”<sup>23</sup> – have tried to recover the progressive

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politics and emancipatory potential retained by a liberal inheritance critically aware of its blind spots.

My study does not rehearse the familiar narrative of the limits of liberal universalism in which citizenship's putative equality is a mere ideological mask disguising systemic inequalities. Instead, I trace how the liberal principles of citizenship – liberty, democratic equality, self-determination, and agency – have been discursively employed and reinterpreted at historically contentious moments by twentieth-century British authors. But this is not to argue for the genealogy of citizenship as one of Whiggish perfectibility, with the umbrella of citizenship gradually extended to the marginalized – slaves, religious minorities, the working classes, women, racial minorities, even foreigners – in an ever-closer convergence of the theory of citizenship's universalism and its material practice. There is nothing teleological about the overdetermined dynamics of political claims for citizenship; but this ambiguity and open-endedness necessitates a more rigorous parsing of the historically distinctive ways in which such claims have been articulated in various domains, from the legal to the cultural to the aesthetic. Judith Butler argues for a “temporalized conception of universality” structured by the unrealized futurity of “not-yet,” since “[n]ot only does universality undergo revision in time but its successive revisions and dissolutions are essential to what it ‘is.’”<sup>24</sup> The iterations of the universal that occur when an existing notion of the universal confronts its constitutive exclusions open up unexpected avenues of political thought and praxis. If this is the case, the liberal politics of citizenship cannot be read as ontologically pre-given – as either ideologically suspect or automatically emancipatory – but must be contextualized within historically specific “revisions” and “dissolutions” that produce variegated and uneven outcomes.

To date, however, there has not been much attention paid to the conjunctures between aesthetic practices, the mutations of citizenship, and the political culture of liberalism in twentieth-century Britain. Contrast this with the temporally adjacent field of Victorian studies: in a 2009 interview with Amanda Anderson, the interviewer, David Cerniglia, observed that “there’s an important revaluation of liberalism going on now in literary studies, and much of it is coming from people trained as Victorianists.” In one sense, this development is eminently unsurprising since, as Anderson responds, “the nineteenth century is when liberalism emerged as a mode of thought and a self-conscious program.”<sup>25</sup> Liberalism in the Victorian age has been shown, among other things, to fuel perspectives of critical cosmopolitanism, to shape conceptions of the individual via the ideal of character, or to structure practices of citizenship such as the secret ballot