

# Redefinition of Englishness in Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George*

## Julian Barnes'ın *Artur ve George* Adlı Romanında İngilizliğin Irksal Söylemi

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### ABSTRACT

Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George* (2005) presents a fictional world based on real or historical events and characters. Barnes's narrative is a re-examination of a historical case, a century later. The narrative depicts how, unlike all his defenders, including the internationally famous detective fiction writer Arthur Canon Doyle, biracial George strives to protect himself by primarily relying on the authority and superiority of British laws. As a solicitor, he defends law as a shared national asset which has the power to produce justice as well as to create a coherent and equal society. However, as a mixed-raced citizen, George is exposed to unsubstantiated accusations. His trial and imprisonment are not based on what he did but on what the communal mind supposes he did. Thus, as this paper argues, race is presented as an integral property of Englishness in *Arthur & George*. The central problem in this narrative is how the blind pursuit of a racially based understanding of Englishness can drive racial hatred and thus bring about injustice.

**Keywords:** *Arthur & George*, Englishness, immigrant, Julian Barnes, race prejudice

### ÖZ

Julian Barnes'ın *Artur ve George* (2005) adlı romanı gerçek veya tarihsel olaylara ve karakterlere dayanan kurgusal bir dünya sunmaktadır. Barnes'ın anlatısı, bir asır sonra tarihsel bir vakanın yeniden incelenmesidir. Anlatı tüm savunucularının aksine, uluslararası üne sahip dedektif kurgu yazarı Arthur Canon Doyle da dâhil olmak üzere, çift ırklı George'un öncelikle İngiliz yasalarının otoritesine ve üstünlüğüne güvenerek nasıl kendini korumaya çalıştığını anlatmaktadır. Bir avukat olarak, George hukuku adalet üretme ile birlikte tutarlı ve eşit bir toplum yaratma gücüne sahip ortak bir ulusal varlık olarak savunmasına rağmen melez bir vatandaş olarak asılsız suçlamalara maruz kalır. Yargılanması ve hapsedilmesi ne yaptığına değil, toplumsal aklın ne yaptığını zannetmesine bağlıdır. Böylece, bu makalenin savunduğu gibi, ırk, *Artur ve George*'da İngilizliğin ayrılmaz bir özelliği olarak sunulmaktadır. Bu anlatıdaki temel sorun, ırksal temelli bir İngilizlik anlayışının körü körüne peşinde koşmanın nasıl ırksal nefrete ve böylece adaletsizliğe yol açabileceğidir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Artur ve George*, İngilizlik, göçmenlik, Julian Barnes, ırk önyargısı

### Introduction

Julian Barnes's tenth novel *Arthur & George* (2005) is a historical–biographical narrative which has much in common with his other works. The “blurring of fiction and history,” or as Vanessa Guignery (2006) elsewhere terms it, the “generic hybridity – part history, part fiction” (pp. 41 and 61), is a recurring theme in Julian Barnes's oeuvre. The relationship between fiction and historiography in *Arthur & George*, as Christine Berberich (2011) highlights, holds a central place:

Steeped in historical research yet informed by fictional knowledge made possible only by the novelistic imagination, Julian Barnes's *Arthur & George* (2005) moves away from his earlier postmodern historical metafictional works such as *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) and *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989) to reinvent the traditional historical novel, as well as its author. Whereas Barnes's early playful and experimental engagement with historical metafiction contributed to shaping high postmodernism, at the beginning of the twenty-first century the author again proves a significant influence on the transformation of our conception of the relationship between the past and the present (p. 117).

*Arthur & George* represents a historical event in its centenary through, as Sebastian Groes and Peter Childs (2011) argue, “creat[ing] an amalgam of fact and fiction” (p. 9). Thus, the novel, in Venessa Guignery’s (2009) words, “mixes reality and imagination so that the book is part history, part biography and part fiction [...] [It is] a hybrid of fiction and biography” (pp. 129–130). The main purpose of this mixture is to reintroduce a historical event since, as Cornelia Stott (2010) states, Barnes “is very interested in answering questions concerning memory, finding ways of making the past accessible, and dealing with the tendency of wanting to change the view of the past to fit the present” (p. 12). Reiteration of a historical event in Barnes’s narrative, however, is mainly because of the determining role of a cultural factor, both in the story’s temporality and in the contemporary moment of the narration.

Sir Arthur Canon Doyle’s historic involvement in George Edalji’s case is used in the novel as a backdrop to the monolithic concept of Englishness. In his attempt to define Englishness, Ian Baucom (1999) highlights a recent “turn from place to race” as a salient property. According to Baucom: “Over the past century and a half, [...] Englishness has consistently been defined through appeals to the identity-endowing properties of place. [...] in the past few decades a racial narrative of what it means to be English has begun to displace, or has attempted to displace, the localist narrative” (p. 5). Englishness plays a key role in the operation of the storyworld in *Arthur & George*. It is presented as a race-dependent aspect of identity. George, one of the two eponymous protagonists in Barnes’s narrative, does not have the basic quality of Englishness as he is mixed race which exposes him to prejudice and discrimination.

Besides dealing with a historical issue, Barnes also explores a historically debated legal issue in his narrative. Stuart Jeffries (2009) considers Barnes’s familiarity with law to be the main cause of his interest in Edalji–Doyle case. The famous “Dreyfus Affair” in the French context of the early 20th century and Emile Zola’s involvement in it, according to Jeffries account, ignited Barnes’s interest in narrativizing the similar Arthur and George case:

Douglas Johnson, who suggested to Barnes that the Great Wyrley Outrage was the British parallel to the Dreyfus Affair, a miscarriage of justice in the heart of England that equally pointed up the nature of an imperial society shuddering into a new century. Racism, fears of miscegenation, imputations of sexual dysfunction, an establishment cover-up, suspicious footprints – the story had everything (p. 131).

In addition to cae’s historical significance, Barnes’s educational background also played a role in his interest. As Guignery (2009) states, Barnes “studied law at university and passed the bar exams in 1974, but chose at that time the career of a freelance journalist rather than that of a barrister” (p. 129). Such an educational and professional background helped Barnes to critically analyze the role of non-legal, but cultural, actors in British law by relying on George’s case.

Being an immigrant-descendant in Barnes’s narrative is presented as akin to being a life-long object of groundless suspicion. George is a second-generation immigrant. He is not “purely” English but a biracial citizen. His mother is European with ancestors in Scotland, and his father is non-European since his grandparents, by converting to Christianity, migrated from India to England nearly a century before his birth. George’s father is a minister at a Church of England in their small village of Great Wyrley, Staffordshire.

Despite a non-English background, George has most of the native-like properties since he is by birth, education, culture, and even by history an example of a native English citizen. However, to borrow Homi Bhabha’s (1994) terminology, he is subject to “institutional racism” (p. 34). When something goes wrong in his community, he is the prime suspect as he has always been considered a pseudo citizen by the communal eye. In such a situation, how can he protect himself as a descendant of an immigrant family in a world of suspect and doubt? What is his shield against all the poisonous arrows pointed toward him and his family from all sides, even from the respectful side of the law, or from the constitutional polar of law—the police force? Is it his mother’s origin, his father’s profession, his own education, or the principles of the State of Law which is generally supposed to recognize his (racial) identity and protect equality of all sorts for him regardless of his origin and race?

The overall narrative plot in *Arthur & George* revolves around the historical event of Arthur Canon Doyle’s intervention in a racist miscarriage of justice. As a result of being wrongly accused of a ruthless crime based on vague evidence, the Birmingham solicitor of Parsee origin George Edalji (1877–1953) is sentenced to 7 years of imprisonment and is released after 3 years. When he gets out of prison in 1906, he pleads for help by writing a letter in 1906 to the most famous detective writer of the time, whose protagonist Sherlock Holmes submits the perpetrator of any kind of injustice to the law. George’s situation seems immoral and unjust to the internationally famous English writer Arthur Canon Doyle (1859–1930) as he thinks that the injustice should be corrected immediately. Thus, he takes the required action by trying to find the real suspect and culprit. Can he be successful as he is in all his storyworlds? Is George’s case about a factual or a fictional problem? Does the legal system in the real world and society of his time function based on solid evidence and facts, or does it have its own taken-for-granted and biased truth? Despite Canon Doyle’s efforts throughout the story, George’s name is not completely cleared of the accusation by the end of the narrative.

Far from being a work of detective fiction, *Arthur & George* narrates an unusual crime and its consequences. In two phases, from 1892 to the beginning of 1896, and, after a 7-year gap, from 1903 onward, a series of cattle maiming and slaughtering happened in the village of Great Wyrley in Staffordshire, England. Andrew Tate offers a summary of the main plot:

In 1903, George Edalji was found guilty of maiming livestock, and labelled as the lead conspirator of a gang who waged a hate campaign against local farmers in the so-called ‘Great Wyrley Outrages’ and was sentenced to seven years’ hard labour. The case was radically flawed, engendered by racial hatred and the evidence against Edalji never convincing; in fact, the sadistic crimes continued even when the accused was in prison awaiting trial but the case concluded with an innocent man being condemned to seven years penal servitude (p. 63).

*Arthur & George* is narrated in four parts: first part: “Beginnings” (46 pages); second part, “Beginning with an Ending” (160 pages); third part, “Ending with a Beginning” (115 pages); and the last part “Endings” (35 pages). The story of George’s accusation, trial, and conviction is narrated in part two, and Sir Arthur Canon Doyle’s involvement in the case is mainly narrated in part three.

### Race as a Defining Characteristic of Englishness

*Arthur & George*, according to Guignery (2009), “introduces a new topic which had not been dealt with by the author before: racial prejudice. Several passages are therefore devoted to the ambiguity of what being English means” (p. 131). Race is presented as having the central role in the way George is treated. The plot in *Arthur & George* is based on some fundamental conflicts, as highlighted by Andrew Tate (2011): “Tensions between logic and belief, evidence and instinct, law and justice shape the narrative” (p. 64). The novel, in Peter Childs’s (2011) words: “explores the borderlines of nationality and ethnicity, evidence and imagination, doubt and faith, fact and fiction, endings and beginnings” (p. 139). In his interview with Xesus Fraga (2009), Barnes highlights the significance of Englishness, stating: “At the time of *Arthur & George*, Englishness seemed much more about being inclusive or seeming to be inclusive, and so you would aim to be English, you would aim to conform. [...] I’ve had *Arthur & George* put to me as being in part post-9/11 because it deals with how people with the wrong skin colour are always suspected” (p. 142).

Unlike the communal perspective toward him, George considers himself an Englishman in terms of his thoughts and behavior. When his father tells him about their Parsee race, George corrects him immediately: “But I am not a Parsee, Father.” In George’s head the words come back: “the centre of England, the beating heart of the British Empire, the flowing bloodline that is the Church of England. He is English, he is a student of the laws of England, and one day, God willing, he will marry according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England. This is what his parents have taught him from the beginning” (Barnes, 2007, p. 51). As a solicitor, he upholds law and order. He even publishes a legal book in 1901 entitled *Railway Law for the Man in the Train*.

Contrary to his view of himself as an English man, the authorities view him as a mixed-race subject. His barrister Mr. Vachel summarizes his innocence, “There is no evidence that you committed this crime. There is no motive for you committing this crime. And there was no opportunity for you to commit this crime” (Barnes, 2007, pp. 147 and 160). At the trial, the barrister criticizes the police’s baseless accusation: “what have we left after four days here in this courtroom, except the crumbling, crumpled and shattered theories of the police?” (Barnes, 2007, p. 175) Despite the insufficiency of the evidence, the court finally finds George guilty and sentences him to “one of penal servitude for seven years” (Barnes, 2007, p. 179). As the narrator says, “It was not just he who had been sentenced; his family had been too” (Barnes, 2007, p. 181).

As an immigrant family, the communal perspective toward the Edaljis is negative, conservative, and suspicious. For example, what the Inspector calls them represents the police’s perspective; they are a “Strange family” (Barnes, 2007, p. 122). Although “the police had no evidence against him” (Barnes, 2007, p. 133), they request him to “commit” himself (Barnes, 2007, p. 132). Despite his awareness that “the police were blundering away,” he experiences ultimate “relief” with thinking about his “second home, the laws of England,” or by believing in the legal system’s “*lingua franca*” (Barnes, 2007, p. 133). He cannot accept what the police do to him: “Disbelief still burned in him like an ailment” (Barnes, 2007, p. 139). When the court finally sends him to prison, he becomes reluctant to come out because “Everyone knew where he was; every moment of the day he was spied upon and accounted for” (Barnes, 2007, p. 144). His belief in law empowers him to “face his accusers with perfect composure” (Barnes, 2007, p. 163). George believes in what the police and the court system do not.

As narrated in part three of the novel, Arthur Canon Doyle becomes engaged in George Edalji’s case through a letter sent to his office. In Barnes’s fictional world, Arthur does what Sherlock Holmes does in the writer’s detective stories. He endeavors to reveal the truth and, in this way, clear George’s name of false accusations. Despite his success in restoring George’s job and honor, Arthur’s efforts do not end in an “apology” (Barnes, 2007, p. 258) for his incarceration.

Along with highlighting Arthur’s role in changing George’s case into a national one and, hence, to some extent restoring justice, the novel focuses on Arthur’s and George’s similarities and differences, or, as Peter Childs argues, “two figures marked by an overactive and underactive imagination that underlines divergent views of truth and reality” (Barnes, 2007, p. 34). Despite the apparent difference, as Childs holds, Arthur and George share a communal legacy in becoming English:

Both Arthur and George have become English: ‘Irish by ancestry, Scottish by birth, instructed in the faith of Rome by Dutch Jesuits, Arthur became English. English history inspired him; English freedoms made him proud; English cricket made him patriotic [ . . . ] for Arthur the root of Englishness lay in the long-gone, long-remembered, long-invented world of chivalry’ [ . . . ]; George similarly ‘is English, he is a student of the laws of England, and one day, God willing, he will marry according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England. This is what his parents have taught him from the beginning’ [ . . . ]. Education, experience, and memory together school the individual in self-fashioning, which at the level of the country is presented simply as a collective ‘heritage’ (Barnes, 2007, p. 111).

The narratorial comment on the relatively equal process of Arthur’s and George’s acquiring Englishness challenges the static understanding of the term based on its institutionalized sense. However, despite their similarities, they are different from each other since, according to Stuart Jeffries: “Arthur is a one-time eye doctor who hopes to correct a misperception (i.e., the case against George), while George is chronically short-sighted though capable of great insights” (Barnes, 2007, p. 132).

The centrality of law is the controlling factor in George’s discussion with Arthur in their first meeting. George has one request from Arthur: “I want my name back again” (Barnes, 2007, p. 261). Arthur’s first impression is the fact that all the legal bodies from the police to the Home Office have made a mistake in wrongly accusing and convicting George. When he implies that his “father’s origins” should

have been the main cause of the ongoing miscarriage of justice against him, George rejects it: “Sir Arthur, I should like to make one thing quite clear. I do not believe that race prejudice has anything to do with my case” (Barnes, 2007, p. 264). In contrast, he highlights the equal state of his own citizenship:

I was brought up as an Englishman. I went to school, I studied the law, I did my articles, I became a solicitor. Did anyone try to hold me back from this progress? On the contrary. My schoolmasters encouraged me, the partners at Sangster, Vickery & Speight took notice of me, my father’s congregation uttered words of praise when I qualified. No clients refused my advice at Newhall Street on the grounds of my origin (Barnes, 2007, p. 265).

Having identified the limp of superficiality in George’s argument, Sir Arthur tries to make him see the truth. By arguing that “It is not his [George’s] fault if he is unable to see what others can,” Arthur tries to persuade him that race has been the most defining factor in his situation. Unlike George, he thinks they are “unofficial Englishmen” (Barnes, 2007, p. 268). Having paid a visit to George’s family in Great Wyrley, Arthur again mentions and counts racism as the most important factor in his conviction:

He tried to imagine George Edalji in the village of Great Wyrley, walking the lanes, going to the bootmaker, doing business with Brookes. The young solicitor—well-spoken and well-dressed though he was—would cut a queer figure even in Hindhead, and no doubt a queerer one in the wilds of Staffordshire. He was evidently an admirable fellow, with a lucid brain and a resilient character. But if you merely looked at him—looked at him, moreover, with the eye of an ill-educated farm-hand, a dimwit village policeman, a narrow-minded English juror, or a suspicious chairman of Quarter Sessions—you might not get beyond a brown skin and an ocular peculiarity. He would seem queer. And then, if some queer things started happening, what passed for logic in an unenlightened village would glibly ascribe the events to the person (Barnes, 2007, p. 288).

Arthur’s creative imagination helps him to sympathize with the local people in looking at George’s “brown skin and an ocular peculiarity.” Thus, he tries to make George understand how he seems “queer” from the communal eye in his context. He encourages him to see the truth about himself. At the end of their conversation, when George asks him “Sir Arthur, [ . . . ] you think me innocent?” he gives George his ultimate evaluation of the case: “George, I have read your newspaper articles, and now I have met you in person. So my reply is, No, I do not think you are innocent. No, I do not believe you are innocent. I *know* you are innocent” (Barnes, 2007, p. 270, emphasis original).

The factor of race also turns out to be the most defining cause in the police’s accusations against George. In his visit to Captain Anson, despite Arthur’s statement that George himself denies any relationship between the question of race and his accusation, Anson repeats his strong belief which has its roots in his racial hatred: “try to imagine this instead. Imagine a Parsee father putting loyalty to his Parsee family above loyalty to a land not his own, even if it has given him shelter and encouragement. He wants to save his son’s skin, Doyle. Skin” (Barnes, 2007, p. 330). In their second meeting after the publication of Arthur’s Articles in *The Telegraph* in favor of George, when he finds out that Arthur, based on the slim evidence similar to that of the police against himself, has come to a conclusion on one Royden Sharp whose brother was George’s classmate in the elementary school, George politely disagrees with him:

‘I am aware that you consider race prejudice to be a factor in the case, Sir Arthur. But as I have already said, I cannot agree. Sharp and I do not know one another. To dislike someone you have to know them. And then you find the reason for disliking them. And then, perhaps, if you cannot find a satisfactory reason, you blame your dislike on some oddity of theirs, such as the colour of their skin. But as I say, Sharp does not know me. I have been trying to think of some action of mine that he might have taken as a slight or an injury. Perhaps he is related to someone to whom I gave professional advice...’ Arthur does not comment; he thinks that you can only point out the obvious so many times. ‘And I do not understand why he should wish to maim cattle and horses in this way. Or why anyone should. Do you, Sir Arthur?’ (Barnes, 2007, p. 370).

George’s mind is not good at abstract concepts. As a lawyer, he is trained to refer to factual and objective issues. Thus, he cannot accuse somebody of committing a crime based on constructed evidence:

He had read the Statement of the Case against Royden Sharp that Arthur was sending to the Home Office. He had read it several times, naturally. And each time his impression had hardened. His conclusion – his inevitable, professional conclusion – was that it would not help his own position. Further, his judgement – which he would never have dared utter at their meeting – was that Sir Arthur’s case against Sharp strangely resembled the Staffordshire Constabulary’s case against himself (Barnes, 2007, p. 374).

At the end of his campaign, when Arthur, in George’s and Jane’s presence, finds out that George is not completely acquitted, rather that he has just been given a free pardon without reparation, he becomes infuriated. He tries to locate in the legal system an institutionalized state of in-between where (non-English) people like George fit:

It means, it means, my darling Jean, that this Home Office, this Government, this country, this England of ours has discovered a new legal concept. In the old days, you were either innocent or guilty. If you were not innocent, you were guilty, and if you were not guilty, you were innocent. A simple enough system, tried and tested down many centuries, grasped by judges, juries and the populace at large. As from today, we have a new concept in English law – guilty *and* innocent. George Edalji is a pioneer in this regard. The only man to be granted a free pardon for a crime he never committed, and yet to be told at the same time that it was quite right he served three years ‘penal servitude’ (Barnes, 2007, p. 382).

To explain his situation in Homi Bhabha’s (1994) words, Arthur in the preceding passage highlights “The ambivalent identification of the racist world.” In other words, it is “the otherness” of George’s self which is “inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity” (p. 44). Thus, what George does not understand is the fact that, in the dominant context of Englishness, his identity is defined according to a different law or palimpsest.

Thus, George is presented as incapable of understanding the subjective issues such as racial hatred. His evaluation of and conclusion about the committee's final decision is based on a similar argument present in Arthur's conclusion about it:

Innocent yet guilty: so said the Gladstone Committee, and so said the British Government through its Home Secretary. Innocent yet guilty. Innocent yet wrong-headed and malicious. Innocent yet indulging in impish mischief. Innocent yet deliberately seeking to interfere with the proper investigations of the police. Innocent yet bringing his troubles upon himself. Innocent yet undeserving of compensation. Innocent yet undeserving of an apology. Innocent yet fully deserving of three years' penal servitude (Barnes, 2007, p. 388).

George's reliability on law is also emphasized at the end of the narrative where the narrator describes him as feeling "protected by his desk and by his knowledge of the law. It was safe here at 79 Borough High Street" (Barnes, 2007, p. 405). In this way, despite the dominance of the race factor in the active discourse of Englishness within the storyworld, it is George's optimistic perspective toward the law as the only guarantor of equal rights to all people which is emphasized throughout. Therefore, more than being against race prejudice, his resistance is to the static characteristics of Englishness since, according to him, whoever follows the laws in his territory is an English citizen who deserves equal legal treatment.

## Conclusion

Race is presented as an integral property of Englishness in *Arthur & George*. As a mixed-raced citizen, George is exposed to unsubstantiated accusations. His trial and imprisonment are not based on what he did but on what the communal mind supposes he did. The invisible nature of race prejudice is presented beyond the capacity of George's logical mind. His strong belief in the superiority of law to personal thoughts and emotions, and the centrality of solid and impartial evidence in trials are the two driving forces of George's distinctive mental state in the narrative. In this regard, George is a unique character in the storyworld. The question whether a person like him with hybrid identity can be an Englishman is another conflicting point between George and the others, even his fiery supporter Sir Arthur Canon Doyle. The only uniting power of a multicultural society like Great Britain, as George insists on it, is not and cannot be Englishness but the upholding and enforcing of the law. Such a perspective toward the law is the unique feature in George's character which differentiates him from the others. His objective, modern vision of the peaceful and equal coexistence of different identities and, in this regard, his emphasis on the role and function of law are the main characteristics that make George a unique and tragic character. Nobody is like him. Both in his society and in his own family, George is a lonely character whose ideals of an equal society bring him problems. For example, he does not share his father's perspective toward his Parsee Indian sources and religion. George's case and his practice of the existing law as a solicitor show how the law, not the conventional properties of Englishness, is the ultimate criteria in the fate of a person like him, and how its racial interpretation can lead to miscarriage of justice and violate an innocent person's basic human rights.

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