

Scottish National Identity in the Works of James Kelman

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After analysing class in James Kelman's novels, the next cultural aspect to be explored is national identity. The reader would perhaps expect that a contemporary Scottish writer, whom Kelman undoubtedly is considered, would not be able to avoid reflecting upon the issue often labelled as *Scottishness* (although the problematic nature of such term will yet be discussed). After the traumatic experience of the failed devolution vote in 1979, when Scotland lost the chance to finally alter its status of a stateless nation and instead after not being able to find the necessary forty per cent of votes to enable the abolishing of the Home Rule the sense of national identity sank into depths, the Scotland of mid-90s is once again disputing its future as an independent state after the Scottish Parliament is re-established (Devine and Finlay 1997: 8). On various occasions, the Scots are demonstrating their nationality mainly through its powerful symbols and icons, so unmistakably connected with the country and so often sought by the people visiting Scotland. It is the task of this paper to dispute the validity of such icons and assess to what extent do they comply with the nature of Scottishness, which can be found in contemporary Scottish fiction, specifically in the four analysed novels of James Kelman.

When characterising Scottishness, it seems that adjective used most often to describe it is "problematic". Part of the problem could perhaps be as David McCrone suggests, the different understanding of national identity in modernist and post modernist sense. While the modernist view considers the nation to provide a clear and indisputable identity, national identity in the post modernist terms appears often rather limited and contradictory and furthermore, other competing identities are offered (McCrone 1992: 9). Another piece in the mosaic of problematising Scottishness is the incredible concern with history. Again, David McCrone describes this phenomenon as 'conservation rather than development' (McCrone 1992: 4). The historical events and development are treasured to such extent that the actual culture of a country is beginning to deform accordingly and the validity of such culture is disputable. In the case of Scotland, the main two deforming tendencies have been identified: tartantry and Kailyardism:

The dominant analysis of Scottish culture remains a pessimistic and negative one based on the thesis that Scotland's culture is deformed and debased by sub-cultural formations such as tartantry and Kailyardism. (McCrone 1992: 12-13)

The traces of tartantry can be seen practically everywhere in today's Scotland, as no football match, no graduation ceremony are spared of kilts and tartan, and no one who visited Scotland as a tourist could escape the tartan clad shops and tartan covered packets shortbread etc. The fact that the Highlands, the home of tartan, have been accepted as the basis of the Scottish culture and are the home of most of the images and icons used to represent Scotland

nowadays has several dimensions. First of all, it is understandable, as the Highlands have always symbolised an enclosed self-contained society marked by a strong resistance to any interference from "outside" and therefore, could be interpreted as a kind of desired status for the whole of Scotland. Secondly, according to McCrone, due to the late nineteenth century industrialisation, the Scottish Lowlands became very much the same as any other industrial area and thus, accepting the symbolism and iconography of the Highlands provided a powerful means of distinction (McCrone 1992: 17). On the other hand, the fact that it is the most backward and barbarous part of the country is also rather interesting, and perhaps could be seen as somehow contributing to 'the Scot's feeling of inferiority' (McCrone 1992: 186). The second phenomenon mentioned earlier is the Kailyard literary tradition, celebrating the *lad o'pairts* and thoroughly distorting the image of Scotland presenting mostly the idealised rural or small town nature of the country (McCrone, 1992: 97). The consequences of the fact that the *real* Scotland is rural Scotland can be felt in the altogether schizophrenic feeling the Scottishness seems to purvey. As the response to the Kailyardism, discriminating the urban life in Scotland, the equally discriminating Clydesidism was founded in literature to celebrate the male working class hero (McCrone 1999: 66). That is only one of the examples to what extent is Scottishness created of *competing images* no matter whether one concentrates on the Caledonian Antisyzygy and the clash between the Scottish heart and the British head, or the discrepancies between the Highlands and Lowlands, the present and the past etc. (McCrone 1992: 17, 31, 186). The distorted images themselves are no feature of the past. According to Ian A. Bell, the cheap representations of Scots are now designed mainly for *internal consumption* (unlike the Kailyard literature which was providing images mainly for export, i.e. London publishing houses) and they should mainly mobilise the national pride (Bell 1996: 223-224). Many see such an example of such contemporary use of the traditional distorted Scottish imagery and iconography in the 1990 project of Glasgow, the City of Culture. To characterise the main objections of the critics of the project the following opinion of James Kelman may serve as an illustration.

In 1990 in Glasgow conventional myths to do with art and culture and public and private funding were given a full rein. The concept itself, 'City of Culture', was always hazy, extremely dubious indeed... What becomes clearer day by day is that both the adoption and application of the concept derived from another heady mixture: intellectual poverty, moral bankruptcy and political cowardice. (Kelman 1992: 31)

The core of the criticism seems to be the attempt to apply or adopt a cultural concept, the strategy that proves to be wrong and unproductive. David McCrone presents an interesting thought that 'true image does not exist and should not be sought' (McCrone 1992: 187). The term *Scottishness* will always be discriminating because it cannot embrace the enormous variety of identities that the postmodern world offers to the individual. It is particularly the national identity, which seems to be more and more irrelevant under the influence of globalisation, which gives the world more and more ex-territorial character. With the move of the society ever closer to individualism, McCrone's idea of 'pick'n'mix identity' seems to be more than suitable, claiming 'we wear our identities lightly and change them according to circumstances' (McCrone 1992: 195). Therefore, the uniform identity imposed by the concepts of tradition and heritage is contested and one of the conveyors of that criticism is the contemporary fiction.

There is some evidence of the fact that the Scottish fiction was traditionally characterised as highly international, Angus Calder points out the distinguished example of Walter Scott, who himself functions as an icon of Scottishness and whose interest in the

national oral tradition was rather limited, instead he indulged in exploring the central European Romanticism by translating the works of Schiller, Bürger and Goethe (Calder 1995: 1). Looking at the contemporary writing, the international influence seems even more evident. One of the possible interpretations of such tendencies is to see them as an attempt to resist the imaginative creation of Scottishness, which the populist voices present as the sole national character. Instead, as Ian A. Bell claims, the contemporary writers are attempting to reclaim the Scottish culture and provide its new representations avoiding completely the idea of one essential Scottishness and putting greater emphasis on individuality and intra-communal difference (Bell 1996: 220-226; Schoene 1995: 116). Reflecting these theoretical claims finally onto the works of James Kelman, one can see such assumptions confirmed. In his works, there is absolutely no trace of any stereotypically Scottish icon or cultural feature. Traditions, history, landscape or customs differentiating Scotland from the rest of the world for Kelman simply are not an issue, are not dealt with, except for one brief mention of Scottish folk music in *A Disaffection* and the Hogmanay tradition of *first-footing* in *A Chancer* (Kelman 1999: 262; Kelman 1985: 175). Although the lack of Kelman's interest in traditional Scottish symbolism could be also explained using Simon Baker's characteristics of the problematic relationship of Glasgow as an urban community to the rural model of *real* Scotland:

The city's relation to the rest of Scotland is problematical ...it came into being at a time when Scotland had for more than a century ceased to be an autonomous political or cultural unit. This means that Glasgow has never experienced an independent or organically functioning Scotland. (Baker 1996: 237)

Such claim will certainly be only a partial reason for the author's lack of interest in *Scottishness*. It is the turn towards a multifaceted individual identity typical for the contemporary writing, which is reflected in the concentration on the individual character, who is not representative of any community or group and does not actually carry any specific attributes. In fact, one of the few features these characters have in common is the existential moment of crisis, which is approaching, and, according to Bell, the crisis is usually based on the fact that the characters are losing or have lost their 'self-hood' (Bell 1996: 226). Trying to confirm the validity of such statement for the novels of James Kelman is not very difficult as the tension of the critical state of all the main characters is maintained usually from the first page to the very end of the book. With *Busconductor Hines* the crisis probably nests in Rab Hines's exhaustive hate of his present situation—the job he is doing and the place he lives as much as the inability to lead *normal* family life. Tammas in *A Chancer* cannot cope with the fact that gambling as an occupation will not win him a sufficient income, yet he does not see any alternative enterprise to go into. Pat Doyle in *A Disaffection* is losing his mind because of loneliness and the pressure of working under the controlling system. And finally, Sammy in *How Late It Was, How Late* frustrated because he simply does not know what is happening with his life and he seems to have no control over it. This feeling of frustration and crisis is actually quite successfully transmitted onto the reader, not only because the novels lack any solution and, as was mentioned previously, the reader is putting the book down frightened by the thought that things might simply stay and 'continue much as they are, even if circumstances change' (Bell 1996: 232). The sense of *lost self-hood and self-direction* is further intensified by the fact that the characters actually have a very little control over what is happening with their lives.

Kelman's characters are essentially figures to whom things happen, rather than agents of change, passive beings incapable of initiative or of instigating independent planned courses of action, apparently unsupervised by an authorial presence. Kelman's later fiction takes on this notion of unplanned metamorphosis systematically and uses it as the central structuring principle in a number of works. (Bell 1996: 231)

Such quality of Kelman's work is indisputable and Sammy in *How Late It Was, How Late* is more than an illustrative example with his fatal interaction with the police officers, which he cannot handle in spite of the warning signs from the 'sodjers': 'But he was ready, he was letting them know he was ready and it was all he could do no to laugh I mean really it would get out of control in a minute he was gony get fucking hysterical or something' (Kelman 1998: 5). The quote merely illustrating Sammy 'being ready' to accept what is to come without any action and thus, start the metamorphosis of his life into the nightmare of blindness. Yet, Bell puts this characteristic of Kelman's writing solely down to the refusal of the existing concept of Scottishness, although perhaps in addition to that, one can feel in between the lines the helplessness caused by the above mentioned schizophrenic quality of a post-colonial society attempting to find its own identity as a nation-state in the period of time where mono-cultural society no longer exists and thus, Scotland is locked in its own desire which cannot be fulfilled. Such message is not only conveyed through the choice of characters, but also, and perhaps mainly through the narrative technique, which in case of James Kelman is a particularly interesting point of analysis.

The absence of any initiative of the characters in Kelman's novels, which was mentioned in connection with several other points of analysis, is rather contrastingly accompanied by the rejection of the narrator. The significance of the lack of 'the authority of the narrator' (Bell 1996: 227) could be, in terms of analysing Scottishness, understood again in two different ways. Either the rejection of the authoritarian narrative voice can signify the attempt to reject any authoritative control over Scotland and its culture—and that attempt is not necessarily directed only against the Scotland's position within Great Britain—it can very well aim at the attempts to simplify the imaginative creation of Scotland by using the traditional icons. On the other hand, the absence of the unifying and directing narrative voice often results in the loss of the thread of the plot and, instead, the reader enters the unbelievably bewildering world of the character's inner speech, which is for example often the case with Pat Doyle and his inner relation to the European artists and thinkers

The idea of charging for carrier bags was just so fucking ridiculous... What chance could there ever be for the world when dirty skunks like the latter were in power. Dirty skunks like the latter having arrived via the flagstones of Vulcan, armed with a bunch of fish suppers a' la the good Rossi, whose pathways through the hordes hysterical flagellants

Goya. Goya said that. O did he. Yes, he fucking did, I never knew was noted for his witty sayings. ... I'm an authority on Goya who was three years older than Johann Wolfgang von Goethe whose love affair with the beautiful Katchen Schonkopf

Fuck off. That includes Werther (Kelman 1999: 258)

Such lack of 'narrative discipline', as one may call it, so often resulting in the character's or the reader's confusion and the dissipation of the plot, could also be interpreted as the lack of confidence in terms of the future of Scotland—what would happen if all the certainties of the contemporary Scottish existence were removed, i.e. the position of Scotland within the world

would no longer be determined by being part of Great Britain and the Scottish identity likewise. The absence of the narrator is not the only indicator pointing towards such interpretation.

Narrative form rather typical for the Scottish novels is, according to Donald Wesling, a first person narration, and although all of the four analysed novels are written in the third person, the author characterises them rather as '1st person narration written in the 3rd person' (Wesling 1997: 87, 93). The evidence of such interesting feature is perhaps strongest in *Busconductor Hines*, for example when he is contemplating the possibility that his wife might have left him:

Serves her right for being sound asleep. Women shouldn't go to sleep, it's a spoiler and we don't want that kind; what we do want is the fragrant aroma and soft flesh to be encircling one that one is pulled back beneath the sheets against one's will. Come on you I want to go to my work, stop it, stop it! [...]
(Kelman 1997: 151)

Similar example could be quoted from *How Late It Was, How Late* where Sammy in prison tries to take his mind of his hopeless case, which he seems to understand as little as the reader, and attempts to relax and prevent himself from losing his temper

A guy once showed him the ropes. It was based on breathing exercises. Especially good if ye were a smoker cause it helped clear yer lungs at the same time: what ye did was ye breathed out as far as ye could go then ye held it for a wee while, then blew out again. (Kelman 1998: 159)

By pointing out similar examples, one could reach the same conclusion as Donald Wesling, who claims that the Scottish fiction is quintessentially monologic and this monologism expresses frustration. Because it often results in the clashes between the inner and outer speech (Wesling 1997: 81-2). In generating this theory Wesling admits the inspiration he found in the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin summarised as: 'The very problem of the national and the individual in language is basically the problem of the utterance (after all, only here, in the utterance, is the national language embodied in individual form)' (Wesling 1997: 81). The clash between the inner and outer speech is an omnipresent feature of Kelman's novels, as it seems to be in fact embodied in the author's definition of the novel as the first person narration in the third person. The characters are constantly struggling to realise what is actually said and what is their internal monologue, the sense of confusion and struggle being further advanced by a complete lack of punctuation. Yet again, one cannot help interpreting the clash between the 'national' and the 'individual' in language as the clash between the nationally felt and proclaimed need of self-identification and urge to re-define the national culture through the devaluation of the stereotypical cultural icons traditionally connected with Scotland; on the other hand though, stands the individual and perhaps the fear of the sudden uncertainty to come after the traditional frame of reference is removed. Returning to the original idea of the true representation of Scottishness in the contemporary Scottish fiction, one may find its essence in this very feature, as according to Wesling 'monologism is reaching to the bottom of Scottish national character' (Wesling 1997: 92). It would be only natural that it would be mostly confusion and uncertainty which one could find there in time of re-defining the national identity.

To conclude the attempt to find the reflection of Scottish national identity in the novels of James Kelman, it is necessary to point out that the reader will certainly not find any traces of the symbols traditionally connected with Scotland. The reason for such absence is rather

obvious, as the icons ascribed to Scottishness by such tendencies as tartanry, Kailyardism or the Gaeltachd, are not considered representative of the variety of identities which the postmodern understanding of a nation offers and indeed are seen as deforming to the Scottish culture. The contemporary Scottish fiction, Kelman included, reacts to such deformation by ignoring the traditionally recognised icons and rather are portraying the various individual identities, which exist in the postmodern society. Therefore, one yet again encounters the move from the communal to the individual, as the individual in crisis stands in the centre of attention of the contemporary writers. Yet, in the encounter between the inner and outer speech, one can feel the clash between the national ambition to re-establish its position of an independent state and re-define its culture, and the individual fear of the uncertainty resulting from that ambition. Thus, the conclusion is that the novels of James Kelman do reflect the true essence of contemporary Scotland.

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