



**RE-AFFIRMING ENGLISHNESS:
ULTIMATE HALF-NESS AND (CRITICAL)
MULTICULTURALISM IN BILLY BRAGG'S *ENGLAND,*
*HALF ENGLISH***

Lisda Liyanti

Literature Departement, Faculty of Humanities, University of Indonesia

lisda.liyanti31@ui.ac.id

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Abstract

National identity in Great Britain is always interesting to discuss, as it dealt with England, Scotland, Walles, and Northern-Ireland identity, yet it is English identity that overshadowed British Identity. The problematic concept of English identity also brought up by Billy Bragg, a remarkable British musician, in his *England, Half English*-song in early 2000. This paper scrutinizes the question of “what does half English mean and what should be meant by full English?” using critical views on multiculturalism. The result shows that the basic idea of Bragg's works important in showing how the most changeable and essential signs of national culture and the clearer voices of its immigrant are perfect expressions of the "ultimate" Half-ness of England.

Keywords: English, Identity, Billy Bragg, Multiculturalism

Introduction

National identity in Great Britain is always interesting to discuss, as it dealt with England, Scotland, Walles, and Northern-Ireland identity. The case of Brexit brings it to the higher level, as the identity of being British harden as it separated from being

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"European" and so what should be defined as being British or English. The words "England" and "Britain" are sometimes used interchangeably. While Britain bonds four nations -- Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England -- as one united entity, the fact of England's centrality in demographic, cultural and political aspects of British discourses makes it clear that, in comparison to the other three states, England has a greater difficulty in defining its own national identity without being confused by Britishness. The issue of English identity also brought up by Billy Bragg in his song -in early 2000- and still relevant today. As a remarkable British musician with a commitment to political, social and humanitarian issues, Billy Bragg has contributed a great deal to the discussion of English national identity. He was influenced, musically, mostly by the Clash, but it was the Margaret Thatcher regime and especially the miner strike in the 1980s that consolidated his political engagement in the national issues. His awareness of "our England" empowered him not to let the Tories and others on the right exclusively define Englishness. In 2006 he also condemned the Left for its lack of willingness to fully engage in the national identity discussion:

For the past thirty years, the Left has been fighting fascism with one hand tied behind its back. Our egalitarian support for internationalism has prevented us from properly engaging in the debate over identity. Reluctant to make any concessions to reactionary nationalism, we have, by default, created a vacuum, leaving it to the like of the BNP and the Daily Mail to decide who does and who doesn't belong here. (Bragg, *The Progressive Patriot. A search for belonging*, p. 26-27)

Defining himself as a socialist, internationalist and English,¹ Bragg has claimed that these three identities, even though thought contradictory by some, work together. He has said that it is out of these three identities that he has attempted to engage in political interventions against conservative party seriously. His political interventions have been launched by his music, and also in articles, website and blogs he created as a "second chamber," (Williams, p. 96) and recently by his books.

There are undoubtedly many Bragg's songs containing the message of English national identity, "New England," "Take Down the Union Jack," "Between the Wars," and recently "Full English Brexit" to name few. In this article, the issue of his vision of English national identity will

¹ „Well I certainly consider myself to be a socialist, I aspire to be an internationalist, and there is no escaping the fact that I am English, so does it make me a walking contradiction? I would expect a resounding yes from the likes of Michael Portillo, but I increasingly find myself isolated from the left on this issue too." (Bragg, *Looking for a new England*)

be explored in his 2002 song, "England, Half English," as it is essential for Bragg's concept of English-ness. The notion of "half" will be the focal point that will lead us to the questions: What does *half* English mean and what should be meant by *full* English?

Method

This paper will conduct a literary study, scrutinizes Billy Bragg's song text entitled "England, Half English" using critical views on multiculturalism.

Results

History and National Identity: The Case of England

In 2006, following the parliamentary election, Bragg's writings on the issue of English national identity, including previous articles and songs, were published in his book *The Progressive Patriot*. In the introduction, he acknowledged a link to his 2002 song "England, Half English," which - as clearly suggested by the title - depicts a solid idea to counter the concept of "pure Englishness," a concept that was remarkably popular after the 7/7 London bombing. While the right-wing commentators hurried to blame multiculturalism and urged a return to British values, Bragg noticed something ignored by the right-wingers: one of the perpetrators is "one of us" (Billy, *Progressive Patriot*, p. 300). These commentators implied that multiculturalism is the opposite of Britishness, Bragg challenged them by questioning what Britishness should mean. This debate was accentuated in "England, Half English," as Bragg vociferously defends the ubiquitous yet unduly diffident narrative of non-puristic Britishness and then England national identity. The necessity of national identity is seen clearly in football championships, as England and Scotland play in the same group that they have to bring their own national identity. However, in the debate of creating a sense of English national identity, one cannot escape the history and the facts of Britishness.

Talking about national identity and identity formation, Frantz Fanon offered a reliable conception, saying that national culture is an effort that is "made by the people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people have created itself and keeps itself in existence" (Hall, p. 58). By the same token, Benedict Anderson stressed the importance of "the sphere of thought" in Fanon's argument "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Hall, p.56). Based on these two arguments of Fanon and Anderson, existence and identity then dwell in an abstract

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world of imagination and thought. It is how we imagine and think about who we are that affirms "memory and history" as significant elements in the quest for identity.

Stuart Hall emphasized that identity formation should be seen as a process rather than as a fixed product. This was reiterated by Cristina Julios in her book *Contemporary British Identity*, which argued that "identity is periodically constructed and de-constructed" (Julios, p.5). Thus, the notion of "Englishness" is always being (re)-constructed and cannot be defined in one clear definition. Its definition is always changing and consists of many layers of association and should, therefore, be understood in the context of the history and narration. The importance of history and narration was addressed by Bragg when he highlighted the role of a school in identity, saying a school is the first place that delivers formal history. He warned that this kind of history is mostly political. In the formal narrative of history, imperialistic history becomes the pre-condition of racism that can only be rivalled by a strategy of "recognizing," as Bragg has stated in his interview (Tyler, Billy Bragg Interview on *Progressive Patriot?*). Awareness and recognition are the first steps to opening up the possibility of a narrative that can counter the formal one. Recognition can mean counter-narratives and be a recognition of England's various histories, a depiction that is in tune with Robert Winder's argument, where he described history as an expressionist painting that can be interpreted in many ways (Winder, p. 479).

Clearly, any works dedicated to exploring the history of Englishness will encounter great difficulty in putting aside the "outsider"—either England's migrants or her colonial lands—and will have to consider the "outsider's" story and contribution, be it positive or negative. This might seem natural, to link the history of the nation with those who were considered outsiders, as it goes along with the popular and basic conception of identity as the relation of the Self and the Other. However, the outsider contribution to England is highly remarkable. It is not only reflecting or contracting with English characteristics but goes further, determining and defining what now is called "Englishness." One very interesting example, mentioned by Stuart Hall, is the ironic reality that though tea time is claimed as the pure Englishness, not one tea plant can be found in England (Wohlsein, p. 31). This is one obvious example showing that foreign cultures (derived from England's colonial land counterparts or migration in a broader sense) have a significant place in the heart of the culture of England. Thus, it is difficult to find or trace a mono-color of Englishness. Englishness can only ever be imagined in multi-colour fabric, considering that, from its very beginning, Englishness could not

be separated from its "foreign" influences.

In "England, half English," we find Bragg's vigorous support of this particular concept in the examples of how the cultures of immigrants become a part of daily life in England. As he did in "Progressive Patriot," in this song Bragg uses a palimpsest model that combines his personal and family history, while mirroring national history and identity.

Bragg claims himself as half English, citing the fact that his ancestors were also half English: "My mother was half English / and I'm half English too." In the lyrics, as he brings in the history of England, it is clear that this personal story of half Englishness applies to all English people. This idea also aligns with the core argument in "Progressive Patriot." As Fanon and Anderson argued that memory and history play a significant role in talking of (re)constructing identity, in "England, half English," these memory and history are central to the lyrics: "Britannia, she's half English, she speaks Latin at home/ St George was born in Lebanon, how he got here I don't know." Though Britannia and St. George could refer to real migrants in England, it also refers to symbols of Britain and England. Britannia is the name given to Britain by the Romans. It is a Greek word that received phonetic Latin rendition (Rojek, p. 17-18). Thus, great name "Britannia" was imported by Romans and pronounced in Latin, where "she speaks Latin at home." The same can be seen in St. George – the name for England's flag, which is the first essential symbol of Englishness and the English people -- is not "native" English. It was St. George – born in Cappadocia (eastern Turkey) and later moved to Lydda, Palestine, which was his mothers' ancestral home – that became the patron saint of England after a soldier returned from the crusades claiming to have been aided by St. George in battle. Though some claim a red cross symbol was in use in England before St. George, the story of Cross of Saint George that was painted on the large banners of the armies of the early Crusaders is the most popular story for the origin of the use of the symbol (*Flag of England*, Britannica). Bragg continues with the claims of multi-narrative Englishness, singing of the English football team, "those three lions on your shirt, that never sprang from England's dirt," which is to say they are also half English. It came from the Norman House that conquered England in 1066 (Winder, p. 23-39). The lyrics, "Dance with me to this very English melody/ From morris dancing to Morrissey,/ all that stuff came from across the sea," imply the same thing, making clear that even these typical English musical representations are imported from other places. With these words, Bragg aggressively argues that even from very early on, the essentialist concept of England is disputable.

In another lyric, "I'm a great big bundle of culture tied up in the red white and blue. I'm a fine example of your Essex man," Braggs describes his perfect illustration of the conception of Britain:

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A mix and collection of culture held together by the Union Jack Flag. Further, the lyric “I’m a fine example of your Essex man,” connect that idea of Englishness to Bragg's own family history, as ten generations of his father's family line were born in Essex (Himes, *I Smell the Blood of a Half-Englishman*). The definition of “Essex man” is in his book *Progressive Patriot*, where he describes it as “newly affluent white working class, whose predilection for sovereign rings and right-wing Thatcherism made them into folk devils in the eyes of the predominantly middle-class media” (Bragg, *Progressive Patriot*, p. 31-32). While indicating the story of the struggling working class over their sovereign rights, a movement that links back to the Magna Charta and becomes one essential component of Britain identity, Bragg raises a conflicting fact: By loudly claiming himself as a fine example of an Essex man and at the same time defining himself as a Half-English, Bragg says that these “folk devils” who support right-wing policies are actually half-English.

Thus, the basic idea of real or full English, in Bragg's conception, is indeed in its half-ness. It is the half-ness that is the ultimate “purity” that reflects and accounts for the whole notion of Englishness, and opens to the changing formation evermore. Yet Bragg does not devalue England with the notion half-ness. In contrast, the concept is praised, as heard in the last lyric of the song: “Oh my country, of my country, what a beautiful country you are.” This lyric ought not to be interpreted as sardonic, as Bragg makes clear:

I do love this country, and I do feel I am a patriot. I don't mind talking about this country but what I don't adhere to is that my country is better than yours, or 'My country right or wrong.
(Bragg, *Bragg blends new and old*)

In this citation, Bragg defends a specific sort of patriotism. He promotes progressive patriotism, a concept of patriotism that is in tune with the progressive nationalist SNP statement: “No one country and no one human being is worth more or less than any other” (Bragg, *Progressive Patriot*, p. 17). That is a patriotism that acknowledges the existence and equality of others. Finally, although there must be a particularity that is a part of “authentic” English character, as might refer to or derive from “authentic” values, customs or great Charter, there is no such thing as an essential, pure, or full Englishness that could form a stable and enduring concept of identity. It is in the last part of 20th century and first of the 21st century that promotes the resistance of the mono-colour and mono-culturalism of Englishness that forces us to look closer into the counter-discourse: the

"problematic" multiculturalism.

Billy Bragg and (Critical) Multiculturalism

There is one common thread in definitions of multiculturalism. That is that multiculturalism is "critical of and resistant to the necessarily reductive imperatives of monocultural assimilation." Monoculturalism was the norm in the 19th and 20th century, and the conception was marked by the absolute power, domination, and imperialism, which were the main characteristics of "the first World," including Britain. The Other was always seen as the "Barbarian" and was, in the history, excluded (Goldberg, p. 7). Monoculturalism was the norm until the end of the Second World War, and it was only during the 1960 reform movement that the silenced "Barbarian" was given voice and Monoculturalism faced any serious challenge.

Cristina Julios, in her book *Contemporary British Identity*, divided history into three important narratives, shifting between mono and multicultural discourses in Britain (In her further explanation, she refers mostly to England). She writes that 1900-1950s was a narrative of "discourse of Laissez-Faire/Status quo," the 1960s-1980s was "a discourse of Multiculturalism," and 1990s-2000s was "a discourse of integration" (Julios. p.77-130). The clear distinctions between these discourses could be seen as follows: while multiculturalism is ultimate diversity, and status quo or assimilation is ultimate monoculturalism, integration could be perceived as diversity on the periphery, while univocal or monocultural at the centre (Goldberg, p. 6-7). However, while Julios might describe the focal point of each period, it would be better to depict them as a triangle rotation model, with each point relating to others. If we do this so that the second narrative, multiculturalism, is the centre peak of the triangle, we see the multicultural narrative is the central narrative of the history of Britishness and will always have to be discussed to illuminate others. In the recent integration discourse in Britain Julios also noted:

In the case of Britain, the closing years of the twentieth century witnessed a gradual ideological shift away from multiculturalism towards the integration; away from the individual right to be different and towards the collective duty to integrate. [...] This trend has now culminated in an unprecedented public debate about the state of multiculturalism in Britain. (Julios, p. 139)

Furthermore, Julios notes that the notion of multiculturalism became popular in Britain after World War II. It was as non-white immigrants became visible in society, and their different cultural

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practices were more apparent, likely existing parallel with the local's. It might have mainly emerged in part because of the end of the war, for it is during war or crisis times that a country puts remarkable emphasis on the unitary identity. "Us" is defined by the most basic and "simple" denominator, as perfectly demonstrated in the speech of former United States President Bush, when he said, "If you are not with us, you are against us." In defining "Us" during a time of war, it is just "where do you stand" that matters; other things such as race and nationality²Or religion is not important. The conception of the common enemy and the need for allies penetrate the rigid conception of inclusion and exclusion, however. This situation in WWII has been described by many historians as a milestone of multicultural Britain (Bragg, *Progressive Patriot*, p. 309-310).

In *Progressive Patriot*, Bragg explores Multicultural Britain and notes multiculturalism is a notion that is perceived differently by different people. There are four definitions that he notes are commonly conceived definitions before he goes on propose his own definition of the idea. first, multiculturalism is little more than a form of consumerism, "all about taste and the enjoyment of things from outside your own community." Second, multiculturalism is an ideology (mostly held by those on the Left) that translates into demands for cultural equality. Bragg argues further that "multiculturalism can not, itself, deliver an equal society," and that "genuine equality can only be achieved through social justice." Third, multiculturalism is a sense of "demographic multiculturalism," so that successful multiculturalism is seen if "black and ethnic minority groups are visibly present." Fourth, multiculturalism is used pejoratively, for it is "perceived by the majority indigenous population that multiculturalism denies their right to express themselves as they see fit" (Bragg, *Progressive Patriot*, p. 299-300). Bragg has argued that these four understandings of multiculturalism do not include an appropriate technical definition useful for examining the multicultural in Britain. He has stressed the need for precise definition and proposes the following:

2. Thought this citation might not really relevant in the contexts of WW, I use this citation on purpose to show the development of the crisis: Of course during the World War I and World War II, we should not understate the importance of "nationality" where the great animosity of a specific nation (in this case Germans) was so vigorous. (consult Robert Winder, *Bloody Foreigners*, chapter 10). This might be interesting to show the type of crises that develop in this century, while in the WW the ideology of the national state might be the center of the crisis, the current globalization crisis shifts its focus that highlights "the clash of civilization." This is interesting to question whether in the multicultural debate nowadays is this development also applied.

Rather than describing a matter of taste, a campaign for cultural equality, a reverse hierarchy or an excuse for separatism, perhaps we should think of a multicultural society in the same way that we perceive our present classless society, as an evolutionary process which does not necessitate the abolition of cultural differences or the assimilation of one group into another. **The multicultural society would be one in which ethnicity, like class, no longer matter.** [Emphasis added] (Bragg, *Progressive Patriot*, p. 300-301)

Having access to what Bragg thought about multiculturalism, through his book and articles, it is interesting to examine how he depicts this in "England, Half English." The first thing to note in the song is there is a discrepancy between what Bragg says in his writings and his song. In the book he criticizes the concept of what he called "consumerism multiculturalism," he seems, in his songs, to slip into this concept, as is seen in the lyric:

My breakfast was half English, and so am I you know
I had a plate of Marmite soldiers washed down with a cappuccino
And I have a veggie curry about once a week
The next day I fry it up as bubble and squeak
Cos my appetites half English and I'm half English too

These are very popular English dishes, Marmite Soldiers and bubble and squeak, and then they are paired with a cappuccino, originated from Italy, and equalled, on other days, by a veggie curry that was brought to England by an Indian immigrant. A multicultural cuisine now becomes part of life for many English people. It is essential to bear in mind that we cannot take for granted that one who consumes multiple products from different countries and listens to music from other parts of the world is against xenophobic. Being a very multicultural consumer is one thing and being very multicultural, as this is defined by Bragg in his book, in another thing. However, we should perhaps account for the apparent discrepancy by taking into account the limited space of the song, as compared with the length of the book or articles and the great difficulty in representing an abstract concept such as "classless" multiculturalism, in compact lyrics. It would be difficult to do without falling into either consumerism or a too-simple demographical concept. The problem of representation can be seen here.

Classless multiculturalism, where the cultural differences are highly visible but do not matter or cause discrimination, more or less fit with the second idea of multiculturalism in Bragg's book, which is multiculturalism as "cultural equality." Furthermore, Bragg's other articles show what he might mean by this "multicultural society-classless sense":

[...] as an internationalist, we believe passionately in a multicultural society. Surely the basis

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of this the belief that when different cultures interact, both are enriched? Our culture has as valued a place in the mixture as any other. (Bragg, *Looking for a new England*)

As an internationalist, advocating and aware of cross-national issues, Bragg is aware of the naivety of holistic and inclusive concept of culture. A classless sense of Multiculturalism, where the interaction between different cultures can enrich all parties, requires the preconditional urge and maybe even certain willingness. That is the urge of openness and willingness to challenge the stable, dominant meaning and representation explained by Homi Bhabha's notion of "Hybridity," as the "new area of renegotiation of meaning and representation that modalities in and through which multicultural conditions get lived out, and renewed" (Goldberg, p.10). It is the first three definitions used by Bragg in *Progressive Patriot*, consumerism, demographic, and cultural equality, that could be a starting point for the creation of hybridity conditions and "true" multiculturalism. However, this can only be achieved with "proper education," according to the theorist of Critical Multiculturalism.

Bragg's song shows his proposal for multicultural conditions consist of a strong anti-racial stance and the importance of proper "input," or education on the multicultural issue. Though this is not entirely expressed in the same context as the Critical Multiculturalism that has emerged since the late 80s (as a direct challenge and answer to the liberal or benevolent forms of multicultural education), all the things that Bragg has done so far can be seen as a part of "multiculturalism education." With his songs, writings and textbook, all of it linked to the ideology of the Labour Party as its ground ideological curriculum. We can see the subtle yet vigorous commitment to this engagement in the following quote:

[...] This suggests that music does not have the impact of an event, which changes the world instantly and tangibly, but is more akin to an idea, which works in a gradual way - making small subtle changes that build up over time. In that sense, music can be a catalyst for change, particularly social change. (Bragg, *Can Music Still Make a Difference?*)

Music cannot change the world but can change the way people think and perceive their world, Bragg believes. He insisted that "it is up to the audience to change the world, not the performer." He also said that he does not try to define Englishness but to create a space for a discussion about it. Yet it is clear that his engagement and intervention are meant to support a specific definition by

supporting and promoting the idea of the non-holistic cultural concept and offering this link to a party organization. Bragg has argued that one important axiomatic ground for the English national identity is everybody feeling English, as a sense of Belonging (Bragg, *St. George in 21st century*). It is also important for Bragg that everybody be able to respect national identity without being a "narrow-minded" patriot, though it is somewhat abstract and leads to other questions and debate.

The title of Bragg's album and song, "England, Half English," was taken from the title of Collin MacInnes' book, which was published in 1957, a collection of essays on the social conditions in England in the fifties and sixties. Against the same background as Bragg's idea of "half English," MacInnes was "one of the first commentators to notice the changing face of the nation, with the influx of new peoples and cultures – from American blues to African rhythm – and their influence on British youth" (Weller, 1986). While MacInnes' essays explored the contemporary conditions and captured a "snapshot" that contributes to the new half England, Bragg's re-affirmed the notion of half-ness. He explores the history and analyzing the current social and political conditions in England at the beginning of 21st century, a time where a cultural phenomenon is analyzed not in its "order," but in its "chaotic" remark, where historically constructed and imagined communities have brought multi-voices to the current realities.

It is an attempt to formulate the proper multicultural England that still requires a long debate and changing strategies to achieve the "classless society" that seems ideal to Bragg. Stressing and re-convincing people of the point of the dignity and beauty of half-ness can be a starting point in constructing the equal standpoint and cultural equality as a precondition of proper multiculturalism Britain. However, it is clear that the journey is still long. In conclusion, consider a citation of Babha's, where he describes "the English weather" as a metaphor for "forever English." While Babha talked about it in the context of increasing marginal identity on England and Colonialism, we could also find the basic idea of Bragg's works important in showing how the most changeable and essential signs of national culture and the clearer voices of its immigrant are perfect expressions of the "ultimate" Half-ness of England:

To end with the English weather is to invoke, at once, the most changeable and immanent signs of national difference. It encourages memories of the "deep" nation crafted in chalk and limestone; the quilted downs; the moors menaced by the wind; the quiet cathedral towns; that corner of a foreign field that forever England. The English weather also revives memories of its daemonic double: the heat and dust of India; the dark emptiness of Africa; the tropical chaos that was deemed despotic and ungovernable and therefore worthy of the civilizing mission. These imaginative geographies that spanned countries and empires are changing; those imagined communities that played on the unisonant boundaries of the nation

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are singing with different voices. (Bhabha, p.319)

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