Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review
Print ISSN: 3006-5887
Online ISSN: 3006-5895
https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11

Tracing Americanness: An Evolutionary Narrative Review Across American History

[1]Jawad Khan, [*2]Imran Ali, [3]Qaisar Khan

[1]Lecturer in English, Department of English, University of Malakand, and PhD Scholar, Department of Linguistics and Literature, University of Haripur.
[*2]Assistant Professor, Department of Linguistics and Literature, University of Haripur. Corresponding Auhtor Email: imranali@uoh.edu.pk
[3]Chairperson, Department of English, and Dean, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Malakand.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review
Print ISSN: 3006-5887
Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Abstract

This paper critically reviews the emergence of the concept of Americanness, its evolution, and perspectives along the course of American history. The review also encompasses the interaction of the concept in American literary works, particularly American novels. A narrative review approach is utilized to review the origin of Americanness and its impact on American institutions, experiences, and literature. Through qualitative research methodology, the study undertakes to analyze the interactive relationship of the concept of Americanness and American literature through historical periods. Although Americanness at times shifts its meaning and nuances owing to different political, social, and cultural milieus, still some of the tenets of the concept of Americanness remain fixed, and their relevance attracts literary authors to incorporate the concepts in their celebrated works.

Keywords: Americanness, American novel, Interactive Framework, American culture and experience

1. Introduction

One of the earliest accounts that propagates the theory of Americanness is Crevecoeur's book, Letters from an American Farmer: Letter No. III (Crevecoeur, 1793), where he postulates his views about the newly formed country, America. He states that people of various races, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds came to America to flee the injustices and deprivations of the old world to build a new culture and system based on egalitarianism, fair play, and democratic values. He further elaborates that not only do these new entrants to America leave behind their former identities and fuse into a new nation, but they also shun their past biases, manners, and ranks and become a part of a new country and government in hope of a better life. "Americanness" and "melting pot theory" became synonymous terms after the 1908 play by the sociologist and playwright Israel Zangwill. After a huge number of immigrants started moving to the United States in the early twentieth century, the theory became quite appealing and convincing to a large global audience on the American continent. The proponents of the theory claim that since America is a unique land of opportunities for different cultures and races, they need to melt their former identities and cultures in the melting pot in order to form a new and special

American identity.

American experiences evolved with the various cultural, social, political, and regional forces at different times since the advent of the new nation. For Nathan Glazer (1998), Americanness, assimilation, Americanization, and multiculturalism are synonymous terms, (1998), terms, and he reviews Americanness across historical and cultural epochs. No doubt, various political, social, and regional factors contributed to the story of Americanness at different times; still, social, the overarching tenet of the concept of Americanness drew inspiration from the founding fathers of the nation.

Glazer quotes Crevecoeur, who famously said in 'Letters from an American Farmer' (1782) that an American is not only a biological combination of different races but also accepts a new mode of government and life while leaving behind the past associations of culture and identity. Glazer hints at the erosion of the promises and ideals of the founding fathers by the ensuing generations as the ideals of freedom and justice were ignored at the behest of politics and exploitation. The sublime declaration of independence and the clarion call for upholding justice were eroded by successive generations, and the Red Indians, the Black population, and the vulnerable were sidelined from the American mosaic. Glazer reminds the readers of Emerson, who also believed in the ideal of an egalitarian American life for all and sundry. The way Europe emerged like a phoenix from the ashes of the Dark Ages, likewise American life has sprung from the injustices and deprivations of the old world.

As the concept of Americanness is multilayered and has a long history, the present study attempts to study and analyze the assimilating and Americanizing efforts in the past two centuries. The review heralds from the ideals of the founding fathers and the subsequent retraction of American governments and policy circles on those ideals. This narrative review analyzes the concept of Americanness, its origin, evolution, impacts, and reflection over time, with a specific focus on literary perspective.

2. Methodology

The study uses a systematic literature review and a qualitative research approach to examine how the concept of Americanness has originated and evolved over time. This methodology begins with the clear articulation of objectives of the current study and

analyzes the published scholarships from various disciplines such as history, cultural studies, sociology, and American studies. It focuses on how the notion of "Americanness" has been defined, criticized, contested, and transformed across time. Relevant academic sources are identified through keyword searches in databases like Google Scholar using terms such as *"Americanness," "melting pot*," "American *identity*," and "national identity." The selected works are reviewed to identify key themes, definitions, and shifts in the understanding of Americanness across different historical periods. The analysis focuses on how scholars have interpreted and redefined the idea of being American in response to social, political, and cultural changes. This qualitative, literature-based methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of Americanness through scholarly perspectives.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Crevecoeur (1793) was probably the first critic to present and discuss the concept of Americanness. In his pioneering work (Letters from an American Farmer: Letter No. III, Crevecoeur, 1793), he argues that people from different regions with different socio-cultural and religious backgrounds came to America and became permanent residents. Since these immigrants had different backgrounds, they could not accept each other's customs or laws. Thus, to live together peacefully, these immigrants set aside their old identities and developed a shared sense of *Americanness*. This idea represents a democratic and rational way of life, grounded in the principles of the Declaration of Independence (1776), which upholds equality, fairness, and the pursuit of happiness as the natural rights of every American.

3.1. Emergence and Evolution of Americanness

After a long and turbulent history of immigrants in the new land of America since the sixteenth century, the colony of America got its independence from England in 1776. The new nation was an amalgam of different individual and collective experiences, and resultantly, it contributed to the overall culture of American life.

Synder (1927) states that ignoring the social and cultural environment of American life while teaching American literature is tantamount to committing a grave mistake, as literature reflects society. For him, political and historical considerations are to be accounted for along with highlighting the literariness of the texts. For Synder,

war veterans, statesmen, journalists, clerics, and other notable professions deserve equal importance in understanding the tapestry of American culture and literature.

To support his premise, Synder brings forth legendary personalities like Hamilton, Jefferson, Paine, and George Washington and equates their importance and contribution to writers like Stowe and Hawthorne. Synder believes that the literary authors basically penned down the fears, hopes, and struggles of the mentioned political personalities. The main argument is that the literary artist and author go hand in hand with the American culture, history, and civilization. Both the intellectual/literary and political statesmen complement each other along the way.

In the same way, Nathan Glazer (1998) reviews the concept and its related terms, such as amalgamation, multiculturalism, and Americanization. Glazer recalls the historical development of the First World War and the strategies used by the American government in manipulating the public against a common enemy. For Glazer, America developed institutes and launched political programs in the name of American studies, which would indoctrinate people that their first duty is to safeguard America, and Americanism was deeply inculcated in the public. Germans, Irish, and other ethnicities were mobilized to forego their previous associations with their mother countries and think about an American identity.

Ironically, the US developed a different strategy in World War 2. This time the US encouraged its Italian, German, and Irish population to connect with their home countries and visualize the atrocities committed by Hitler in their homelands. America did not leave a single opportunity of exploiting its people against a threat. For Glazer, this could be a normal thing, as every nation has a right to defend itself, but the different ways in which Americanness was invoked in both world wars is a classic example of the concept of Americanness and its projection in national and international affairs.

Furthermore, the issue of the Black population was not discussed in these dialogues, yet the fighting of global dictators on foreign lands compelled the US to revisit its Black policy of apartheid, and finally in the 1960s, they were able to get emancipation from the clutches of white rule, and the widening gulf between the Blacks and the whites was reduced, and a spirit of egalitarianism reigned.

'In Exceptionalism's Exceptions:' Lewis (2012) also propounds some inner problems and pitfalls in the American version of exceptionalism. After a thorough and historical review of Americanism, he advances many approaches in the evolution of the concept of Americanness and its interaction with the social experience and institutions.

For Lewis, Puritans inculcated an American spirit rooted in the democratic ideals of the founding fathers. The discipline and godly attributes of fair play and egalitarianism were fostered at an early age in the new nation. Enlightenment ideals of the French philosophers and statesmen like Rousseau and Smith were adapted by the leading fathers, and in literature, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Emerson, Whitman, and Melville voiced the democratic spirit of their times. So, in both the socio-political context and the literary field, Americanness exerted a tremendous influence on the psyche of the American public.

Tocqueville (1969), in his book, Democracy in America, highlighted a scar on the democratic mantle of the American nation ____ slavery. He opined that the institution would cripple the democratic ethos of the nation and would jeopardize its credibility as an egalitarian society. Tocqueville also hinted at the perceptions of the founding fathers about the Black population, whom they considered as cultural blemishes. The warning of Tocqueville was right, and after a couple of decades, the civil war put the nation in an existential crisis. Du Bois, another critic, questions the legality of the American empire at the cost of exploiting its Black population and marginalizing it further into ghettoes. He goes further and attacks the overseas imperial designs of the US, as the latter acts for its own vested interests.

Niebuhr (1952). is also quoted by Lewis, who expounded the view that the United States is practicing hypocrisy as it wages war in the name of civilizing missions. Niebuhr calls it the height of hypocrisy, as the American public has been taught the evils of foreign occupation by its politicians, historians, diplomats, and teachers. This mode of Americanism is tantamount to duplicity, as the Americans preach peace and fair play but implement wars and violence abroad for their vested interests.

Lewis believes that Americans have always thought about themselves as saviors and rescuers, as they did after 9/11. They restore lives, rehabilitate chronic illnesses, fix

messes, and respond proactively to save lives. However, this national thinking got perverted by some of its leaders, and the sublime narrative of saviors, which reflected a great nation, turned into a monster by justifying the illegal and inhumane occupation of foreign lands and resources under the pretext of saving lives. In 1980, William Appleman, a historian, encapsulates the idea in his seminal work *Empire as a Way of Life*, propounding that empires maintain control by spreading such powerful narratives about themselves. The post-9/11 situation, for Lewis, is a continuity of imperial designs in the name of moral responsibilities. The Americanness of the previous decades shifted its focus from the high ideals of its fathers to the pragmatic utility of exploiting resources and making America great again (MAGA) as envisioned by Trump in his electoral speeches.

Along with the democratic ideals, Americanness is also associated with work ethics. Tracing its roots to the early Puritan settlers who emphasized the importance of diligence and sobriety in attaining both worldly and spiritual goals, Jim and Berry (1998) conclude that work has always remained a primary ingredient in the recipe of Americanness. According to these authors, even the concept of the 'city upon the hill' is an extension of the idea of hard work in attaining a society that is based on fair play and justice. Furthermore, the authors make a distinction between labor and work. For them, labor is something forced upon an individual, and it lacks the element of joy, while work is self-fulfilling. The authors support their point by quoting from classic American writers like Thoreau, Emerson, and Hawthorne.

3.2. Alternative Definitions of Americanness

Ruby Kennedy's (1952) study on intermarriage patterns challenged the traditional idea of a single melting pot in America. She put forward a "triple melting pot" model, which said that instead of all groups mixing into one culture, people in the U.S. mostly mixed within three religious groups: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. These groups served as the main spaces where individuals from different ethnic and national backgrounds mixed and formed shared identities. Will Herberg (1983) later supported this idea in his book *Protestant–Catholic–Jew*, emphasizing that religion is a central factor in shaping social and cultural identity in America. In contrast, George Stewart's concept of the "transmuting pot" offered a different perspective, arguing that as

immigrants joined American society, they gradually adopted existing cultural norms rather than transforming them. His model highlights conformity and the dominance of established traditions, suggesting that new cultural influences were absorbed without significantly changing the core of American culture.

In 1964, Milton Gordon expanded on the ideas of Kennedy, Herberg, and Stewart by developing a more systematic approach to understanding assimilation in America. He examined earlier models such as Anglo-Saxon conformity, the melting pot, and cultural pluralism but sought to replace these metaphorical or moral explanations with a framework grounded in social evidence. Gordon criticized the notion of a single melting pot as overly simplistic and unrealistic, arguing instead for a concept of "multiple melting pots," or sub-societies, which included groups like Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and even intellectuals. Although these groups often remained socially distinct, he observed that they gradually became culturally similar through shared American experiences. Importantly, Gordon also recognized that this model excluded African Americans, who were largely barred from white society due to segregation laws and the ongoing ban on interracial marriage in 22 states, mostly in the South and West, until the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Even after legal reforms, later developments—such as the Supreme Court's 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder* decision weakening the Voting Rights Act—revealed persistent racial inequalities. Historically, the one-drop rule, which classified anyone with African ancestry as Black, created racially mixed African American communities that embodied a more complex reality of identity and belonging. For this reason, some scholars argue that the Black community, rather than the broader American society, represents the only genuine "melting pot" in the United States.

3.3. Rebuttals on Americanness

Historically, the concept of Americanness has been peppered with various artistic modes, like literature, throughout the journey of the American nation. By the time the melting pot theory of Israel Zangwill was gaining prominence, almost at the same time, the melting pot image was presented differently in the literature of Scandinavia. Orm argues that Scandinavian immigrant fiction challenged the notion of a melting pot and assimilation rather than embracing it blindly. (cf. Immigrant Minds). For

example, Waldemar Ager (1869–1941), a Norwegian immigrant and author of 'On the Way to the Melting Pot' (1917), views loss as a product in the assimilating journey of the American melting pot. The protagonist of the novel, Lars, who is the protagonist of the novel, assimilates himself into the American way of life, but still he is socially and culturally an impoverished soul. A character of the novel hints at it in these words: First they stripped away their love for their parents, then they sacrificed their love for the one they held most dear, then the language they had learned from their mother, then their love for their childhood upbringing, for God and man, then the sounds they learned as children, then their memories, then the ideals of their youth—they tore their heritage asunder little by little—and when one had hurled from his heart and mind everything that he had been fond of earlier, then there was a great empty void to be filled with love of self, selfishness, greed, and the like. […] Thus they readied themselves for the melting pot's last great test' (Waldemar Ager, 197).

This passage vividly projects fragmented souls who are not accepted with their own identities and are forced to be fused in the melting pot with their identities shattered and lost. The employer of Lars is a factory manager, and he thinks in one of the scenes that useful electric devices like a typewriter and a sewing machine cannot be melted down but only humans. Actually, this is an ironic way of satirizing the originality and identity of humans who are thrown into the melting pot like a piece of a machine. Basically, Ager's criticism was first published in the local Norwegian language and was later translated for the Norwegian American community in 1995. Chaos, loss, and regrets are the notions that Ager symbolizes for the melting pot. The melting pot destroys old men and women without taking care of their inner voices and souls. (Øverland, "From Melting Pot," 53), an image implied for denationalizing those who are not English by descent" (ibid.).

Henry Roth, another immigrant author (1906-1995), published a novel in 1934, '*Call It Sleep*.' David Schearl, the protagonist, hits a rail that is electrified, and it results in a "surrealistic melting pot melange" (Sollors, Ethnic Modernism 140). A moment of complete presence is accomplished after the encounter with the electricity in a Joycean world: "[h]e views the electric current as if it were a divine power" (Sollors, Ethnic Modernism 141). David's absolute melting can be read fruitfully as a

personal rite that gives his life another turn rather than as a ritual of Americanization. Roth and Ager are just the tip of an iceberg that is replete with examples about the melting pot theory and its incorporation in literature by creative means. The writers criticize, construct, and reimagine the different effects of the melting pot for its various citizens. The controversies and debates surrounding the melting pot actually started with the immigrants of the first generation, and it still continues as an integral part of US academia, fiction, and statecraft (DE Angelis, 2017).

3.4. Effects on Literature

In *The Paradoxes of American Literary History* (2021), Michael Boyden offers a fresh and complex perspective on the development of American literature between 1870 and 1910. Rather than focusing solely on origin stories and their justification, Boyden examines how these narratives have been reshaped by literary historians trying to address the current crisis of legitimacy in the humanities. He challenges single-cause explanations for the rise of American literary history and emphasizes the importance of contradictions and diverse viewpoints in shaping it. Boyden also critiques the tendency to privilege one theory of national or literary origin—whether English or European—over others, arguing that such hierarchies distort understanding and limit critical inquiry. Instead, he encourages openness to multiple interpretations. Drawing on Rufus Griswold's *Writers of America* (1847), Boyden highlights how early American critics viewed their own literature as inferior—a "Nazareth of the Mind"—while European readers showed greater interest in American writers. Griswold traced this insecurity to the dominance of pirated European books before the U.S. adopted copyright law in 1892, a condition that reflected America's struggle to define its own literary identity independent of European influence.

In their *Cyclopedia of American Literature* (1856), the Duyckinck brothers presented an inclusive vision of American literature, claiming that all works produced on American soil, literary or otherwise, were part of its national literary heritage. Their aim was to balance earlier Northern-centered accounts like Griswold's by recognizing the South's intellectual contributions. Although the South lacked the same educational and publishing opportunities as the North, the Duyckincks argued that Southern writers had made a fair share of political and cultural contributions. Their

extensive volumes seemed intended to demonstrate the South's literary vitality and subtly challenge New England's dominance in defining American intellectual life. They also emphasized that early American writing had deep European roots, highlighting George Sandys's 1626 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—produced in Virginia—as the first significant literary work in America. By foregrounding Sandys and his Southern context, the Duyckincks questioned the conventional belief that American literature originated solely with the Puritans of New England, instead suggesting that its beginnings were more diverse and regionally complex.

In *American Literature in the Colonial and National Periods* (1902), Lorenzo Sears identified what he called a colonial "renaissance" in American culture, visible in literature, art, architecture, fashion, and even naming practices. He attributed this revival to the "historical spirit" of his era, though he also warned that it might signal a growing sense of imperialism. By devoting significant attention to the colonial period—from the first English settlements to 1783—Sears suggested that America had matured enough to claim a literary heritage of its own. Around the same time, literary critics such as John Seely Hart expressed ambivalence about America's relationship to Britain. In his *Manual of American Literature* (1872), Hart described American writing as "that part of English literature produced on American soil," implying continuity rather than conflict between the two traditions. Yet, Hart also sought to establish American literature as an independent field of study, much as his earlier works had done for English literature. His efforts, later recognized by institutions like Princeton, reflect the broader nineteenth-century struggle to define a distinct American literary identity within—and gradually apart from—the English cultural legacy.

4. Conclusion

The concept of Americanness has continuously evolved alongside the historical, political, and cultural development of the United States. The concept of being "American" has evolved from Crevecoeur's 18th-century definition to its 20th- and 21st-century redefinitions, mirroring the nation's values and contradictions. At its foundation, Americanness was tied to freedom, equality, and opportunity—values derived from the Enlightenment and embedded in the Declaration of Independence.

However, the review reveals that not all communities were able to fully realize these ideals. Racial divisions, class inequalities, and cultural exclusions often undermined the inclusive vision that the early theorists of Americanness imagined.

Waves of immigration, war, industrialization, and globalization have shaped the meaning of Americanness across historical periods. Thinkers such as Glazer, Tocqueville, and Lewis have shown that the concept not only unites but also divides—invoked at times to promote democracy and progress, yet also to justify exploitation and imperialism. The shifting interpretations of Americanness mirror the changing priorities of American society itself. Whether expressed through the optimism of the melting pot theory or through the skepticism of its critics, the term captures the nation's constant negotiation between unity and diversity.

American literature has played a crucial role in expressing, contesting, and redefining this national identity. Writers from different backgrounds have used fiction as a space to question what being "American" truly means. Works such as those by Ager and Roth reveal the emotional and cultural costs of assimilation, while authors like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman celebrate individuality and freedom as core American virtues. These literary voices show that being American is not a set idea, but a process of looking at oneself and starting over. In sum, Americanness is best understood as a fluid and evolving construct that continues to shape American institutions, values, and creative expression. Despite its contradictions, it remains a powerful unifying ideal that invites ongoing debate and reinterpretation. The enduring relevance of this concept in literature and culture demonstrates that Americanness is not a finished project but an ongoing narrative—one that mirrors the complexities, aspirations, and struggles of the American experience itself.

5. Recommendations

Future investigations into the notion of Americanness ought to broaden their parameters by integrating interdisciplinary methodologies that link literature, sociology, and cultural studies. Since the current review highlights the evolving and multifaceted nature of Americanness, subsequent studies could explore how globalization, digital culture, and transnational migration continue to reshape American identity in the twenty-first century. Comparative studies between American

and non-American literary traditions may also offer valuable insights into how notions of identity, belonging, and nationalism intersect across different contexts.

6. Limitations

This study, being a narrative and qualitative review, relies on existing literature and historical interpretations instead of original empirical data, which limits its scope. The study primarily draws upon English-language sources and canonical American authors, which may overlook diverse linguistic and regional contributions that also shape the idea of national identity. Additionally, the review's interpretive nature may introduce subjectivity in the analysis of theoretical perspectives and literary representations.

References

Ager, W. (1995). *On the way to the melting pot: a novel* (No. 4). Prairie Oak Press.

Boyden, M. (2021). *Predicting the past: the paradoxes of American literary history*. Leuven University Press.

Boyden, M. (2021). *Predicting the Past: The Paradoxes of American Literary History* (p. 216). Leuven University Press.

DE ANGELIS, V. M. (2017). Mythologies of Migration in Henry Roth's Call It Sleep. In *Harbors, Flows, and Migrations. The USA in/and the World* (pp. 331-345). Cambridge Scholars.

De Crèvecoeur, J. H. S. J. (1904). *Letters from an American farmer*. Fox, Duffield.

Duyckinck, E. A., & Duyckinck, G. L. (1856). *Cyclopaedia of American literature* (Vol. 1). C. Scribner.

Glazer, N. (1998). *We are all multiculturalists now*. Harvard University Press.

Gordon, M. M. (1964). *Assimilation in American life: The role of race, religion, and national origins*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Hart, J. S. (1872). *A manual of American literature: a text-book for schools and colleges* (Vol. 1). Eldredge & Brother.

Herberg, W. (1983). *Protestant--Catholic--Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*. University of Chicago Press.

Kennedy, R. J. R. (1952). Single or triple melting-pot? Intermarriage in New Haven, 1870-1950. *American Journal of Sociology*, *58*(1), 56-59.

Lewis, D. L. (2012). Exceptionalism's Exceptions: The Changing American Narrative. *Daedalus*, *141*(1), 101-117.

Øverland, O. (2000). *Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870-1930*. University of Illinois Press.

Roth, F. A. (1990). Henry Roth's Call It Sleep. *The Explicator*, *48*(3), 218-220.

Sears, L. (1902). *American Literature in the Colonial and National Periods*. Little, Brown.

Synder, A. D. (1927). Coleridge on Giordano Bruno. *Modern Language Notes*, *42*(7), 427-436.

Tocqueville, A. de. (1969). "Democracy in America." Vintage Books.

Zangwill, I. (2006). *From the Ghetto to the Melting Pot: Israel Zangwill's Jewish Plays: Three Playscripts*. Wayne State University Press.

Zangwill, I. (2022). *The Melting-Pot*. DigiCat.