

The Scottish Literary Space Within British Culture: Urban Imagery, Language, And the Construction of National Aesthetic Identity

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Abstract. *This article explores the development of modern Scottish literature within the British cultural space, focusing on the concept of sense of place as a key aesthetic and ideological category. Drawing on postcolonial and cultural-literary theory, the study examines how Scottish writers employ urban space, language variation, and historical memory to articulate national identity under conditions of cultural dominance. Particular attention is paid to the literary representation of Glasgow and Edinburgh in the works of Alasdair Gray and Ian Rankin, where the city functions not merely as a setting but as a symbolic and semantic construct. The article argues that modern Scottish prose constructs an alternative aesthetic system through the re-semanticization of local space and language, forming a hybrid cultural model characteristic of postcolonial literature.*

Key words: *Scottish literature, sense of place, national identity, postcolonial aesthetics, urban space, language and culture, center-periphery relations.*

In contemporary literary studies, the relationship between national identity and spatial representation has become a central analytical concern. Within this framework, modern Scottish literature occupies a distinctive position in the British cultural space, shaped by a long history of political union and cultural asymmetry. Despite its integration into British institutional structures, Scottish literature has persistently sought to articulate an autonomous aesthetic voice.

The concept of sense of place, as discussed by David Lodge, provides a productive theoretical lens for examining this process. Literary space functions not only as a geographical reference but also as a medium through which collective memory and cultural self-awareness are constructed. In Scottish prose, the depiction of place becomes a crucial strategy for asserting national specificity and cultural continuity.

This article aims to analyze how modern Scottish writers employ spatial imagery, linguistic hybridity, and historical consciousness to challenge cultural centralization and to construct an alternative literary identity within the British context.

In Scottish literature, sense of place operates as a foundational aesthetic principle. Unlike earlier British prose, where location often served as a neutral backdrop, modern Scottish fiction foregrounds urban and regional space as a bearer of cultural meaning. Place becomes inseparable from identity, history, and social experience.

This tendency is particularly evident in *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*, where Glasgow is represented not simply as a physical city but as a symbolic site of collective memory and existential reflection. Gray's portrayal emphasizes that a city unrepresented in art remains culturally invisible—even to its own inhabitants. Thus, literary representation is shown to be a prerequisite for cultural self-recognition.

In Gray's work, Glasgow functions as a multilayered space where social inequality, historical trauma, and imaginative reconstruction intersect. The city embodies both lived reality and symbolic absence, revealing how cultural marginalization manifests spatially. Through this aesthetic strategy, Gray transforms urban space into a narrative mechanism for reclaiming national identity.

A similar approach is evident in the crime fiction of Ian Rankin, particularly in the Inspector Rebus series. Edinburgh emerges as a dual city: on the surface, a refined historical capital; beneath it, a landscape of crime, addiction, and moral ambiguity. This spatial duality reflects deeper tensions within Scottish society and exposes the contradictions of post-industrial urban life.

Language plays a decisive role in the formation of Scottish literary identity. The coexistence of Scots, Gaelic, and Scottish English creates a linguistically hybrid environment that resists homogenization. In modern prose, the deliberate use of non-standard language functions as a form of cultural resistance, challenging the dominance of standardized English.

This linguistic strategy is not merely stylistic but ideological: it restores marginalized voices and inscribes local experience into the literary canon. The revival of regional speech patterns contributes to the broader process of cultural reassertion and reinforces the connection between language, place, and identity.

The development of Scottish literature has also been shaped by publishing practices. For much of the twentieth century, Scottish writers depended on London-based publishers, which often marginalized regional themes. The emergence of independent Scottish presses enabled the consolidation of a national literary space, allowing local voices, settings, and linguistic forms to gain visibility and legitimacy. Through these institutional changes, Scottish literature has established itself as an autonomous aesthetic system rather than a peripheral extension of British literature.

British writer and literary critic David Lodge, in his work "The Art of Fiction", interprets the formation of the "sense of place" in national literature as an important aesthetic stage.: "The sense of place appeared in the history of prose fiction quite late. As Mikhail Bakhtin noted, the cities of classical romances were mere theatrical backdrops easily interchangeable: Ephesus could be Syracuse or Corinth. The first English novelists, like Defoe or Fielding, described London without any vivid detail characteristic of Dickens's London" [1] – "Joy tushunchasi badiiy proza tarixida kech shakllandı. Mixail Baxtinning ta'kidlashicha, klassik ritstar romanlaridagi shaharlar sahna dekorasiyasiga o'xshar edi – Ephesus o'rniga Syracuse yoki Corinth bo'lishi mumkin edi. Deyarli bir xil tarzda dastlabki inglez romannavislar ham Londondagi hayotni Dickens uslubidagi tiriklikdan yiroq tasvirlaganlar" [T.A.].

According to David Lodge, the level of artistic maturity of prose is determined прежде всего by the extent to which literature is capable of recognizing and representing its own national space. Literary space is not merely a geographical setting but also a crucial medium in the formation of national consciousness.

Based on the analysis presented in this study, the sense of place in modern Scottish literature functions as a key means of national cultural self-awareness. The interaction of place, language, and history has shaped the national aesthetic conception of Scottish writers.

One of the distinctive features of modern Scottish literature is the concept of sense of place. This aesthetic principle articulates the process of national self-identification through literary space. This concept finds a profound artistic embodiment in Alasdair Gray's well-known novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*.

In the novel, the city of Glasgow is interpreted not only as a physical location but also as a convergence point of symbolic, aesthetic, and social memory. Through his depiction of the city, Alasdair Gray emphasizes the necessity of restoring the cultural identity of the people. The following passage serves as a vivid illustration of this idea: "The wandering patches of sunlight slid from one roof to another, making the big tenements glitter against the dark towers of administrative buildings, highlighting the domes of the Royal Infirmary against the grim spire of the Necropolis. "Glasgow is a magnificent city", said McAlpin. "Why do we hardly ever notice that?" – "Because nobody

imagines living here”, said Thaw. “If you want to explain, I’d be glad to listen”, said McAlpin. “Just think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Even if you go there for the first time, you don’t feel a stranger, because you’ve already been there – in paintings, novels, history books, films. But if a city hasn’t been described by an artist, even its citizens don’t live in it in their imagination. What is Glasgow to us? A home, a place of work, a football field, a pub, and a few streets linking them. That’s all... The imagined Glasgow exists only in the verses of a music-hall song or in a few bad novels. That’s all we’ve given to the world. That’s all we’ve given to ourselves” [2] – “Quyosh nurlarining ko‘chib yuruvchi bo‘laklari bir tomdan boshqasiga sirg‘alib o‘tar, ma‘muriy binolarning qoramitir minoralari fonida baland turar-joylar yaltirab ko‘rinar, Qirollik kasalxonasining gumbazlarini Nekropolisning mungli minorasiga qarshi ravshan qilib ko‘rsatardi. – Glazgo ajoyib shahar, – dedi MakAlpin. – Nega biz buni deyarli hech qachon sezmaymiz?

– Chunki bu yerda yashayotganini hech kim tasavvur qilmaydi, – dedi Txo. – Agar tushuntirmoqchi bo‘lsang, mammuniyat bilan eshitaman, – dedi MakAlpin. – Florensiya, Parij, London, Nyu-Yorkni esla. U yerlarga birinchi marta borsang ham, o‘zingni begona his qilmayapsan, chunki sen u yerda allaqachon bo‘lgansan – rasmlarda, romanlarda, tarix kitoblarida, filmlarda. Ammo agar shaharni hech bir san’atkor tasvirlamagan bo‘lsa, hatto uning aholisi ham u yerda tasavvurida yashamaydi. Glazgo biz uchun nima? Uy, ish joyi, futbol maydoni, pab va ularni bog‘laydigan bir nechta ko‘cha. Xolos. Tasavvur qilingan Glazgo faqatgina musiqali zal qo‘shig‘ining satrlarida yoki bir nechta yomon romanlarda mavjud. Dunyo uchun berganimiz shu. O‘zimizga berganimiz ham shu” [T.A.]

This passage articulates a philosophical perspective that occupies a central place in the work of Alasdair Gray: until a space is granted artistic representation, it cannot attain full existence in the collective consciousness of society. The city’s “*lack of imaginability*” is interpreted here not as an aesthetic deficiency, but as a problematic condition within the process of cultural and national self-recognition. From this perspective, a space that remains unrepresented in art fails to become embedded in collective memory, thereby emerging as a factor that hinders the formation of collective identity.

In the novel, Glasgow is not portrayed merely as an ordinary urban space; rather, it is conceptualized as an artistic space that activates cultural memory and embodies the process of rethinking national identity. In this sense, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* is not simply a narrative of individual destiny but a conceptual text that represents Scottish society’s rediscovery of its historical and cultural identity through the medium of art, as articulated in the work of Alasdair Gray.

One of the defining features of modern Scottish prose is a conscious engagement with cultural roots, the transformation of the expressive potential of Scottish English into a literary medium, and a deliberate effort to integrate literary texts closely with specific geographical space. This tendency is not confined to works of high literary canon alone; rather, it also manifests as a stable aesthetic characteristic in popular genres, particularly in crime fiction.

This phenomenon is clearly manifested in the renowned detective novel series *Inspector Rebus* by Ian Rankin. In these works, the author does not confine himself to foregrounding the crime plot alone; rather, he offers a profound artistic representation of the complex cultural layers and psychological atmosphere of Edinburgh. The writer’s personal biography is closely intertwined with this artistic choice: he was born in 1960 in one of Scotland’s central counties, studied at the University of Edinburgh, and continues to reside in the same city. Consequently, the *Rebus* series allows Edinburgh to be interpreted not merely as a setting for events, but as an artistic space that reflects the social and spiritual condition of contemporary Scottish society.

His first novel, “*Knots and Crosses*” (1987), marked the beginning of the series, which today comprises more than fourteen novels, along with several short story collections and novellas [3]. The character of Inspector John Rebus has become central to the Scottish detective tradition: he is portrayed as a “human” hero, shaped by his inner conflicts, strict personal principles, and individual vulnerabilities. As Charles Taylor, a reviewer for *The New York Times Book Review*, emphasized: “*Rankin’s success lies in the balance between the familiar and the unique: Rebus is a cop we think we know, but never fully understand. He smokes too much, drinks too much, and breaks too many*

rules – yet he's the most human detective of our time” [4]. – “Rankin’s muvaffaqiyati tanishlik va o‘ziga xoslik o‘rtasidagi muvozanatda: Rebus biz tanigandek militsioner, lekin biz uni to‘liq anglay olmaymiz. U juda ko‘p chekadi, ko‘p ichadi, qoidalarni tez-tez buzadi – ammo u zamonamizning eng insoniy detektivi” [T.A.].

Critics refer to this genre as “*black tartan*” – a metaphor derived from the combination of the Scottish national pattern (tartan) and a “*dark*” detective sensibility. Within this literary trend, writers such as Val McDermid, Denise Mina, and Louise Welsh have also produced significant and influential works [5].

Rankin’s novels are distinguished in particular by their mode of artistic organization grounded in an urban aesthetic. The author interprets Edinburgh not merely as the spatial setting in which the plot unfolds, but as an image endowed with independent semantic significance. In the writer’s texts, the city is constructed as a complex symbolic space where historical layers, motifs of crime, mythological imaginaries, and questions of identity intersect.

As British critics have pointed out: “*Rankin’s Edinburgh is a city of paradoxes – elegant and corrupt, historical and violent, sacred and profane. It’s as much a character as Rebus himself*” [6]. – “Rankin’s Edinburgi paradokslar shahri – nafis va buzuq, tarixiy va zo‘ravon, muqaddas va dahriy. Bu xuddi Rebusning o‘zi kabi xarakter” [T.A.].

The author’s such a “*literary vision*” of his own city transforms it into an artistic embodiment of national identity. The Edinburgh setting functions as an echo of the inner complexity of Scottish society and of the process of self-identification.

A reader of Ian Rankin’s works-particularly the series featuring Inspector John Rebus-who possesses even a modest familiarity with Edinburgh can readily “*recognize*” the locations depicted across various episodes. The New Town, the inspector’s apartment, the Castle, the Firth of Forth, Calton Hill, the university and its library, parks, and even specific restaurants, pubs, and police stations are incorporated into the narrative with precise nominative and semantic reference. Edinburgh thus emerges as one of the most beautiful cities of Northern Europe-a city of museums and universities, envisioned as the “*Athens of the North*”. However, the text simultaneously gives rise to another “*hidden twin city*”: an Edinburgh of narrow streets, districts afflicted by drug addiction and AIDS, and a vortex of crime and disease-rendered not through the language of statistics, but through the voice of Inspector John Rebus himself. As he observes, drug users are “*more numerous here than in any other city in Britain*”, a claim that compels the reader to accept it not as a literary exaggeration, but as an unsettling articulation of reality.

In contemporary Scottish prose, the image of Edinburgh is frequently interpreted through the artistic representation of the city’s dual spatial character. In literary texts, it is portrayed, on the one hand, as an outwardly attractive and symbolically charged “*upper space*”, embodied by historical monuments, the Royal Mile, museums, and a rich cultural heritage. On the other hand, it appears as a “*lower space*”, one that remains beyond the tourist gaze and concentrates crime, drug addiction, corruption, and hidden social strata. Through these contrasting representations, the city is transformed into a multilayered artistic space that reflects the complex social and cultural structure of contemporary Scottish society [7]. The protagonist’s assertion that “*the past lives in the present*” signifies the interpenetration of temporal layers within a single spatial framework. When the city is interpreted in this manner, it emerges as a complex semantic structure in which cultural memory, moral disintegration, and social conflicts intersect.

In this context, the figure of Deacon Brodie acquires a distinct semantic significance. Historical sources portray him as a socially respected and publicly acknowledged individual during the daytime, while depicting him at night as a figure of dual nature engaged in criminal activity. This image symbolically articulates the presence of moral contradictions and hidden social strata within the urban space [8]. This duality subsequently receives a more profound artistic interpretation in Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde by Robert Louis Stevenson. In contemporary literary discourse, the figure of Brodie is employed as an allegorical model that elucidates the complex interactions between hidden forces operating within the urban space, social respectability, and criminality.

In Ian Rankin's novels, Edinburgh becomes a social space in which this duality is most vividly manifested. In particular, in *Hide and Seek*, the city is portrayed, on the one hand, through the image of the "*Athens of the North*", recognized as a center of culture and learning, and, on the other hand, as an environment engulfed in drug abuse, crime, and moral decay—one that is subjected to investigation by Inspector John Rebus. By exposing the concealed nature of individuals who appear respectable within official circles, Rankin elevates the mechanisms of social masking and dissimulation that govern urban life to the level of sustained artistic analysis.

In the Scottish literary process, the linguistic factor assumes a crucial and determining role. The region's linguistic landscape has been shaped by the historical development of Gaelic, Scots, and Scottish English. Statistical data indicate that approximately 1.1 percent of the population communicates in Gaelic, 35 percent in Scots, and 63.9 percent in Scottish English [9]. From the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, Scots developed as an independent literary language and reached a high artistic level in the works of writers such as Robert Burns, Robert Henryson, and William Dunbar. However, from the period in which the political and institutional dominance of English became firmly established, the socio-cultural status of the Scots language began to decline steadily [5].

By the late twentieth century, the reassessment of attitudes toward the Scots and Gaelic languages stimulated the emergence of a phase in Scottish cultural life commonly described as a "*linguistic revival*". This process was marked by the intensification of lexicographic and normative research projects, the increasingly visible presence of local accents and dialects in the mass media, and the re-evaluation of the literary and aesthetic functions of the Scots language within academic discourse [10]. In Muriel Spark's work, Edinburgh is presented through an even more complex and multilayered interpretation. In the novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, the city is depicted not as a mere geographical space, but as a moral and intellectual territory formed at the intersection of individual memory, social attitudes, education, and ethical decision-making. In this way, the issue of language in Scotland came to be regarded not simply as a communicative tool, but as an essential component of cultural memory and national self-identification [11]. The diverse ways in which characters perceive the urban space shape the image of Edinburgh not as one confined to a single perspective, but as a polyphonic aesthetic construct. This condition elevates the city to the level of a complex artistic system in which individual experiences, social positions, and layers of cultural memory intersect.

In the formation of Scottish literature, publishing policy also functioned as a decisive factor. During the period when many Scottish writers were compelled to publish their works through London-based publishing houses, national literature was effectively marginalized. By the late twentieth century, however, the emergence of local publishers such as Canongate Press and Polygon contributed to the restoration of a national platform for the Scottish novel [13]. These publishing houses reintroduced Scots and the local urban space into literature, thereby shaping an independent poetics of the Scottish novel.

The development of the Scottish literary space can be interpreted as a complex aesthetic process shaped by the interrelation of historical experience, language policy, and cultural memory. Scottish writers articulate national identity not by positioning it in direct opposition to English culture, but rather through its re-semanticization from within. Within this approach, local linguistic forms, regional memory, and historical consciousness become central elements of artistic expression, giving rise to a hybrid discourse and a multilayered cultural model characteristic of postcolonial literature. In this way, Scottish literature emerges as an autonomous aesthetic system situated at the intersection of national and global cultural discourses.

The analysis demonstrates that modern Scottish literature constructs its alternative voice through the aesthetic integration of place, language, and historical memory. Urban space functions as a central narrative agent, transforming cities into symbolic landscapes of cultural self-definition. Language, in turn, operates as both an artistic medium and a marker of resistance to cultural centralization.

Rather than positioning itself in direct opposition to British culture, Scottish literature redefines its identity from within, employing strategies of re-semanticization and hybridity characteristic of postcolonial writing. As a result, it emerges as a distinctive and self-sustaining literary system situated at the intersection of national and global cultural discourse.

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