

**القومية وما بعد الاستعمار في رواية جون لو كاري
الحاج المتخفي**

**Nationalism and Post Colonialism in John
le Carre's Novel *The Secret Pilgrim***

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المخلص

عندما بهت لمعان شمس الإمبراطورية البريطانية في أواخر القرن التاسع عشر وبدايات القرن العشرين أصبح لزاما استحضر الادب كوسيلة دعائية وثقافية مؤثرة لمواجهة التهديدات الوجودية لهيمنة المملكة في العالم. غير أنّ هذا النوع الأدبي على الرغم من نجاحه الملفت كما في اسطورة جيمس بوند، ما لبث أن تراجع ليُستبدل بالجمود والواقعية المجردة. وفي إطار استثمار هذا الإرث في دراسة روايات جون لو كاريه التي اتسمت بواقعية بديلة وانفصال فكري عن الحماسة السائدة في الأدب ما بعد الحرب، فإن الهدف الرئيس يتمثل في الكشف عن الكيفية التي يعكس بها هذا الجنس الأدبي أزمات بريطانيا في مواجهة فقدان سلطتها الإمبراطورية، وفي الوقت ذاته نقد تلك الأزمات من دون اغفال ابراز التشابك بين مفهوم القومية ونظرية ما بعد الاستعمار. وتخلص هذه الدراسة إلى أنّ رواية التجسس لم تكن مجرد وسيلة سرديّة للتسلية، بل أداة للتعبير عن المخاوف الجيوسياسية، ومعالجة الصدمات الوطنية، واستدامة الرومانسية الإمبريالية في سياقات ما بعد الاستعمار.

Abstract

Originating in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, British spy fiction became a literary and cultural phenomenon that was closely linked to the country's imperial consolidation and existential threats to Britain's dominance in the world. However, it was eventually supplanted by animosity and stagnation. In order to adopt and use the leads in a study of John le Carré's alternate realistic intellectual disengagement in passionate post-war novels, the main goal is to investigate how the genre both reflects and critiques British struggles with the loss of imperial power in a study of the interwoven histories of nationalism and post-colonialism. In effect, this study argues that spy fiction functioned as a narrative vehicle for entertainment and articulating geopolitical fears, processing national trauma and sustaining imperialist postcolonial imperial romance.



Introduction

In the decades following the Second World War, spy fiction often centered on a recurring figure: the heroic intelligence officer, portrayed as a Western agent on a righteous mission who longs for the thrill of danger and valor. Yet these Cold War heroes were never entirely free from contradiction—their courage frequently shadowed by moral compromises, wavering loyalties, and deep anxieties about the strength of their enemies. The genre quickly became a subject of fascination, not only for popular audiences but also for scholars, as it revealed a striking range of cultural attitudes, political ideologies, and imaginative possibilities within its narrative framework.

Nasrullah Mambrol 's definition of espionage may provide a useful starting point:

“Espionage novels traditionally mirror world events. War, impending war, international crises, shifting perceptions of world power and influence, real-life episodes of espionage—all have inspired the durable and popular genre of espionage fiction.” (2019)

While Sharma Surajitas illustrated it as:

“a generic category which seeks to include all imaginative narratives detailing and describing human beings involved in covert activity, particularly the clandestine collection and transmission of information, and the destabilization of nations, institutions and even individuals deemed to be adversaries.” (2014)

What sets espionage fiction apart is that it rarely unfolds on the battlefield. Instead, its stories take place in the hidden, symbolic spaces of secrecy and deception, spaces that reflect the subtle workings of imperial power. In British spy literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these narratives were deeply tied to imperial ideology, often mirroring broader discourses on race and nation. Viewed through a postcolonial lens, such fiction can be seen as a cultural tool that both justified and glamorized the imperial project. By drawing on familiar tropes of popular fiction, it did more than entertain; it helped construct a vision of Britain as stable and authoritative at a moment when its empire was already under pressure. As imperial influence began to fade, spy fiction increasingly functioned as a kind of cultural compensation, offering nostalgic reminders of lost grandeur and reaffirming Britain’s imagined central role in world affairs—even as that role was rapidly diminishing.

John le Carré, born David Cornwell, is best known for crafting espionage stories that push beyond the genre’s traditional limits. By reworking the conventions of popular fiction, he reshaped how readers around the world understood politics, power, and the moral complexities of espionage. His influence was pivotal in ensuring the spy novel’s ongoing relevance, turning what was once seen as mere entertainment into a serious literary form. While his early works are firmly rooted in the geopolitical



rivalries of the Cold War, his later novels turn toward the moral uncertainties of a world still haunted by the legacies of empire and increasingly fractured by rising nationalism. From a postcolonial perspective, le Carré's writing captures a historical transition: the movement from a world still shadowed by imperial dominance to one shaped by the conflicts and aspirations of newly independent nation-states. As Rachel Lynn Hoag (2023). argued:

"The first is a tendency among his post-Cold War novels to look inward for their villains, to pitch the protagonist against domestic enemies rather than foreign adversaries. These enemies take the shape of corrupt government officials or the corrupting forces of capitalism."

This study focuses on John le Carré's post-Cold War novels, where he engages directly with questions of nationalism and post-imperial identity. His fiction pushes back, often quietly but deliberately, against dominant political ideologies, setting itself in stark contrast to the patriotic "romantic jingoism" found in Ian Fleming's spy adventures. For le Carré, espionage fiction becomes more than a stage for action; it is a space to challenge the assumptions of imperialist thinking. As Surajit (2014) notes, this resistance is not only a matter of theme but also of representation, with le Carré reworking the very conventions of the genre. His post-Cold War works reveal how spy narratives adapted to a rapidly changing world, at a moment when the genre itself risked losing relevance. In doing so, le Carré addresses the lingering shadows of empire while also interrogating the unsettled geopolitical terrain of the early twenty-first century.

John le Carré's *The Secret Pilgrim*: the first post-Soviet novel and the last of Smiley Figure.

Without the Cold War, John le Carré might never have risen to his central place in espionage fiction. His novel *The Secret Pilgrim* (1990), the first he published in the post-Soviet era, revisits many of the themes that had shaped his earlier work: the decline of British imperial influence and the lasting effects of that decline on the nation's society and institutions. As Jonathan Goodwin (2010) observes, le Carré's lasting achievement lies in his ability to use betrayal and duplicity—legacies of the Cold War—as the foundation for a deeper moral investigation, turning a popular genre into a serious form of literature. His novels of the 1980s illustrate this shift clearly. In *A Perfect Spy* (1986), Magnus Pym's act of treachery stems not from ideology but from his troubled relationship with his father, while in *The Russia House* (1989), Barley Blair betrays his service for love. *The Secret Pilgrim* introduces Ned, a veteran intelligence officer whose reflections reveal both the personal costs of espionage and the larger transformation of British intelligence in the aftermath of the Cold War. Through Ned's perspective—as both participant and observer—le Carré



explores how personal autonomy collides with ideological duty, situating this conflict within the broader redefinition of Britain's secret services in the early 1990s, as Goodwin (2010) suggests.

Ned, the central figure of *The Secret Pilgrim*, is portrayed as a man burdened by the weight of his past, unable to fully reconcile with the choices and compromises that continue to trouble him. The novel's structure—framed as Ned's memoirs—places storytelling itself at the heart of the text, turning memory into both theme and method. On the brink of retirement, Ned looks back on his career, recalling a formative moment at the Sarratt training facility when he invited the aging George Smiley to address a new generation of recruits. Smiley, a symbol of Britain's fading imperial authority, becomes a mirror through which Ned examines not only his personal history but also the broader decline of national power. Yet the encounter offers little comfort. Instead, Ned recognizes that he inhabits a world of uncertainty, marked by fragmentation and instability—a clear reflection of Britain's post-imperial condition. Over the course of the narrative, he finds himself entangled in deception and betrayal, forced to confront the moral ambiguities of espionage while grappling with the dual legacies of a diminishing empire and a transformed post-Cold War order. The Cold War is over Le Carré uses Ned's journey as a (pilgrim) as a symbol for the end of the Cold War and reflects the broader anxieties of a world in transition. Ned resolves to unearthing secrets and pursuing truth. Each chapter of his story recalls his own painful triumphs and inglorious failures. He envisions a "future for British spies that is less marred by hypocrisy and moral compromise than that of his own time"(eNotes.com, 2025).

Ned's journey begins with the wide-eyed eagerness of a new recruit, fresh from training and ready to serve. Yet as his career unfolds, he gradually discovers that he is little more than a pawn in vast geopolitical games that lie far beyond his control. This realization reflects the broader post-imperial condition, in which individuals are trapped within systems of power they can neither fully grasp nor meaningfully influence. One of the most striking examples of this comes in his encounter with the Polish colonel Jerzy. At first, Ned assumes Jerzy's interest in him is driven by the familiar logic of espionage—an attempt to extract secrets. But the truth is quite different: Jerzy wishes to share knowledge rather than seize it. This unexpected reversal unsettles Ned, planting seeds of doubt about loyalty, integrity, and the very purpose of his profession. The episode pushes him toward a deeper crisis of identity and humanity. In le Carré's portrayal, the intelligence service itself becomes a "microcosm" of Britain—an institution unable to understand its own politics or purpose, echoing the nation's uncertain place in the post-imperial world. They are capable of



only "The Establishment's easy trick of rationalizing selfish decisions and dressing them in the clothes of a higher cause." (quoted in Rothberg, 1981).

One of the most intimate threads in Ned's recollections is his friendship with Ben Arno Cavendish, an idealistic teacher he first meets during training in the early 1960s. From the beginning, Ned feels overshadowed by Ben's brilliance and quickly senses that their instructors favored his gifted companion. Once in the field, however, Ned confronts a far more sobering truth: espionage is not only destructive to nations but also corrosive to personal bonds. Ben's betrayal, both of his country and of Ned's trust, strikes Ned deeply, forcing him to recognize how elusive truth can be in a world built on deception. This moment of disillusionment marks a turning point, as Ned begins to question the loyalties of both allies and adversaries, seeing more clearly the moral uncertainty that defines espionage. Unlike the glamorous, thrill-seeking agents of traditional spy fiction—figures such as James Bond—le Carré's characters in the post-Cold War era are shaped by painful encounters with betrayal, both public and private. They refuse the patriotic bravado and exaggerated heroism that often dominate the genre, instead navigating a morally ambiguous landscape where love, loyalty, and survival are precariously balanced against the shifting boundaries of a turbulent global order.

"The purpose of my life was to end the time that I lived in. So, if my past were around today, you could say I'd failed. But it's not around. We won. Not that the victory matters a damn. And perhaps we didn't win anyway. Perhaps they just lost. Or perhaps, without the bonds of ideological conflict to restrain us any more, our troubles are just beginning... What matters is that the long war is over ... if I regret anything at all, it's the way we wasted our time and skills. All the false alleys, and bogus friends, the misapplication of our energies. All the delusions we had about what we were." (Le Carré, 1991, p. 11)

George Smiley, often described as le Carré's quintessential anti-hero, first appears in the early novels *Call for the Dead* (1961) and *A Murder of Quality* (1962), before re-emerging in cameo roles in later works such as *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963). It was this latter novel that firmly established le Carré's reputation as both a realist of espionage fiction and a subtle chronicler of Cold War psychology. Smiley stands in sharp contrast to the conventional spy hero of the period, who is typically cast as a daring patriot engaged in glamorous missions. Instead, le Carré presents him as a figure marked by moral ambiguity and deep introspection, a man whose very ordinariness underscores the ethical dilemmas of espionage. Through Smiley, le Carré offers an early critique of the idealized image of the spy and the ideological certainties that



sustained the Cold War, positioning him as a quiet but powerful challenge to the romanticized conventions of the genre.

This resistance to traditional spy stereotypes reaches a fuller expression in the Karla Trilogy—Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy (1974), The Honourable Schoolboy (1977), and Smiley's People (1979). Across these works, le Carré dismantles the "Bondian" archetype, replacing the confident, heroic agent with a protagonist whose struggles are psychological as much as political. As Abraham Rothberg (1981) observes, Smiley's slow decline throughout these novels is not simply the story of one man's downfall. Rather, it mirrors the erosion of the values he represents in British public life and, by implication, speaks to the broader weakening of Britain's global authority and prestige in the twentieth century.

When a young trainee spy inquires about Britain's colonial past and its once-mighty imperial dominance, Smiley responds:

"The sad answer is, I'm afraid, that the Cold War produced in us a kind of *vicarious* colonialism. On the one hand, we abandoned practically every article of our national identity to American foreign policy. On the other we bought ourselves a stay of execution for our vision of our colonial selves. Worse still, we encouraged the Americans to behave in the same way. Not that they needed our encouragement, but they were pleased to have it, naturally." (206)

Smiley's reflections on Britain's colonial legacy come sharply into focus through his idea of "vicarious colonialism" (p. 206), a perspective that exposes the changing relationship between power and ethics. In his view, the decline of empire left Britain in a position where moral choices became increasingly entangled with the demands of new geopolitical partnerships. National interest, rather than principle, often dictated action, blurring the boundary between what was politically necessary and what could be justified as morally right. Smiley recognizes that, in its post-imperial condition, Britain effectively propped up American influence, thereby deepening the ethical dilemmas surrounding espionage during the Cold War. His insight raises difficult questions about the true purpose of intelligence work in a world shaped by ideological rivalries and shifting balances of power. However, Celia Hughes (1981) observes that the actions of Western governments are inevitably marked by moral ambiguity, regardless of the rhetoric of truth, justice, or human rights. She notes that figures initially cast as ruthless enemies—employing harsh and inhumane tactics—may ultimately be revealed as allies or covert agents working on behalf of the West.

Besides, one of the key features distinguishing le Carré's Cold War novels from conventional spy fiction is the way he portrays women in the lives of his agents. In the Bond tradition, female characters are often



reduced to passive figures—defined by their beauty, compliance, and availability. Le Carré breaks from this model by presenting far more complicated relationships, particularly through George Smiley's troubled marriage to his wife, Anne. Her repeated infidelity, a recurring thread in the novels, not only destabilizes Smiley's personal life but also deepens his characterization as an introspective, wounded figure. Anne, an aristocratic woman of striking beauty, represents both the allure and the pain of a world socially above Smiley's own. Despite her betrayals, Smiley remains bound to her emotionally, recognizing with a degree of painful honesty that his obsessive devotion to his work has left him partly responsible for her unfaithfulness (eNotes.com, 2025).

The Looking-Glass War reinforces these themes through Avery, whose marriage suffers under the strain of his secretive profession. His constant absences and the lack of transparency in his life fuel arguments with his wife, illustrating the destructive impact espionage has on personal relationships. Le Carré repeatedly presents such domestic breakdowns as almost unavoidable, the natural cost of living within a world built on secrecy and deception. Unlike the thrill-seeking adventures of James Bond, le Carré's spies are not motivated by glamour or patriotic zeal. Instead, they are weary, disenchanted figures who long for an escape from the burdens of their work. Their humanity lies in their vulnerability: they are isolated, cynical, and marked by the collapse of ideals that once gave their service meaning. Ned, in particular, embodies this anti-heroic stance. As he reflects on the end of the Cold War, he represents the moral uncertainty and disillusionment that pervade le Carré's depiction of espionage in the aftermath of empire. "We've bought a cottage on the coast. There's a long garden there I'd like to get my hands on, plant a few trees, make a vista to the sea. There's a sailing club for poor kids I'm involved in; ..., they enjoy it." (Pilgrim 335)

Along the same line of reasoning, Ned's journey reflects the gradual disillusionment many spies face as they confront their roles in a morally ambiguous field. As Ned's impending retirement approaches, there are stark reminders of the changing nature of espionage post-Cold War representing the best of those believing in honor and good intentions as well as their inevitable failure:

"The Middle East was a volcano, just as it is now, except that in those days Nasser was our chosen British hate object, not least because he was giving Arabs back their dignity and playing hooky with the Russians in the bargain. In Cyprus, Africa, a South East Asia the lesser breeds without the law were rising against their own colonial masters. And if we few brave British occasionally felt our power diminished by this— well, there was always Cousin America to cut us back into the world's game." (13)



Ned's meditations on the decline of the British Empire, along with the perspectives of his fellow spies, reveal a shift from purely personal struggles to broader historical and moral questions. At this stage, le Carré casts his protagonist as more than just an observer of espionage—he becomes a moral witness, weighing the truths and consequences of Britain's post-imperial reality. This repositioning represents a turning point in le Carré's vision of the spy novel, transforming it into a vehicle for ethical reflection and resistance to injustice. By lending his characters a growing sympathy for the marginalized and oppressed, le Carré distances himself from the conventions of traditional espionage fiction. His emphasis on moral responsibility elevates his work beyond the realm of popular entertainment, establishing him as a literary voice of conscience in an era increasingly marked by violence, uncertainty, and global upheaval.

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