

Identity Crisis in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

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Abstract

Postcolonialism fascinated the art of migration and then globalization and transnationalism that offer different perspectives and interpretations. However, with decolonization, the movements of people have increased either through forced migration or voluntary reason and thus, a large scale of displacement or dispersal takes place and people scatter over various parts of the world. Michael Ondaatje deals with the problem of displacement due to the World War II. This paper focuses on Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* which seeks to explore the identity crisis and displacement experienced both by the colonizer and colonized and the way in which boundaries affects the national and personal identities. It is an antiwar novel. It opens in 1944 at Tuscan Villa San Girolamo in the Central Italy at the end of the World War II. Initially the villa has served as a military hospital for the Allied forces but after the shifting of the war to the north, it is evacuated. Later it is inhabited by Hana, a Canadian nurse of mixed parentage. She volunteers for the war services and she is posted here in Italy. She stays in the villa to nurse a dying, burnt English accented Hungarian man named English Patient. The third member of the villa is Kirpal Singh or Kip, an Indian Sikh, a sapper in the British army. The fourth member who joined them into villa is Caravaggio, a friend of Hana's father, a Canadian-Italian thief and a spy and captive of German. In fact, all the inhabitants of the villa are displaced individuals, both the Westerners and colonized natives. They are exiles and experience loss of identity due to geographical and cultural differences. They are wounded in the war. The issues of nationality and nationalism are explored in the novel. The novel subverts the concept of homogeneous cultural identity on which nationalism is founded.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, identity crisis, cultural identity, displacement.

Postcolonial cultures tried to create or recreate independent local identity. It represents an attitude to resist colonialism, to step outside its influence and to reclaim an autonomous and free identity. It discusses many problems such as the hybridization of culture, universalism, language, cross-cultural recovery and the suppression of indigenous traditions. It invokes ideas of social justice, emancipation and democracy in order to oppose oppressive structures of racism, discrimination and exploitation. Identity is largely determined by the relationship between the self and other. So identity is a social construct. The individuals are parts of one collective body known as a nation. Everyone has a nationality. This idea is defined by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*. He states “It is an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 6). A major theme postcolonialism is the aspect of place and displacement. It is always a feature of postcolonial societies, which have been created by both a process of settlement and of intervention. The issue of identity is of primary importance in the cosmopolitan contemporary world characterized by blending of cultures and Globalization.

Michael Ondaatje has emerged as one of the most celebrated and versatile Canadian writer. He portrays displaced marginalized figures with fragmented identities. Most of the Ondaatje’s characters encounter the identity crisis which shows their inability to cope with new culture and new language. His novel, *The English Patient* (1992) set in an abandoned villa turned into a war time hospital in northern Florence, Patients record the tumultuous events. At the end of Second World War from the perspectives of the marginalized. The haunting and harrowing, yet compelling narrative of the novel spirals around one woman, Hana and three men, Caravaggio, Kip and titular protagonist, the English Patient. The eponymous protagonist, who has received horrific burns injures in a plane crash, is confined to a bedroom in upstairs. Physically immobile, it is through his restless, drifting memory that the story of the victim’s past emerges from a series of teasing fragments that takes an intimate journey between Europe and African continents.

Almásy does not have any fixed identity throughout his life time and this is evident in the multiplicity of names he possesses. He is Hungarian by birth but his education in England enables him to acquire English personality and manners. He has contact with many English friends but when war begins, he aligns himself with the Germans. He becomes a guide for the

spies under the name Cicero and takes them across the desert into Cairo. He enumerates the abstraction of concepts such as nationality and citizenship. He attaches no value to the concept of nations and states. So it is not at all unethical for him to help a German spy through the desert. For him, national identity is completely irrelevant in the desert.

The English Patient is presumably the famous geographer and explorer of Africa, the Hungarian Count Almásy. The expedition party consisted of four explorers – Prince Kemal el Dein, Bell, Almásy and Madox who focused on finding the ancient city of Zerzura, in the Gilf Kebir, a plateau in the Libyan Desert. A sort of supra-national unity is experienced but the Europeans drawn to the desert. The explorers were “men of all nations” (*EP* 141). The expedition moved across different countries. One of the explorers says:

My journey through the Libyan Desert from Sokum on the Mediterranean to El Obeid in the Sudan was made over one of the few tracks of the earth’s surface which present a number of variety of interesting geographical problems.... (142)

Almásy meets Katherine where she accompanies her husband to a desert expedition. Almásy and Katherine fell in love and Katherine’s husband came to know about it. Geoffrey Clifton monitored the movements of the English patient and his group in the Egyptian – Libyan Desert. He was an aerial photographer. He decides to kill all three of them in a plane crash in the middle of the desert. But he himself dies in an air crash. Katherine is wounded and Almásy is not killed. Almásy leaves Katherine in a cave and goes to look for help. He returns after three years during which he worked as German spy leader in the desert. But on his journey the plane exploded and Almásy is badly burnt beyond recognition. A tribe of Bedouins finds him and carries him to the British base from where he is taken to Italy. In the nunnery hospital, he meets Hana and both of them stay in villa San Girolama.

The patient reveals that he was a Hungarian explorer who worked with men from different countries in the desert to find lost cities, lakes and caves. During their work, young Geoffrey Clifton joined them with his wife, Katherine. Geoffrey Clifton was secretly working for British Intelligence, photographing North Africa, in preparation for the impending Nazi invasion. At first, Almásy resents the presence of Katherine as he believes that desert is no place for a

woman. Later on he falls in love with Katherine. Almásy constantly moved from one place to another. He was, “the man of the world, who had walked ten years earlier from Dakhla Oasis to the Gilf Kebir, who charted the Farafra, who knew Cyrenaica and had been lost more than twice in the sand sea” (244-5).

Almásy was one of the greatest desert explorers who worked for the Germans during the war. He was always on expeditions out Cairo. In 1941, he became a guide for spies transporting them across the desert into Cairo. He guided Eppler through the desert from Tripoli all the way to Cairo. He was referred to as the English spy in Cairo his national identity is completely irrelevant in the desert. In 1942, The English Patient went to the Gilf Kebir which lies on the Egyptian-Libyan border. Almásy tries to elude the force of identity. The English Patient has lost his identity in the desert. This fact is realized as the doctors in the hospital discussed:

He just doesn't know who he is. Where did he come from? The Bedouin brought him into Siwa Oasis. Then he was in Pisa for a while, then... One of the Arabs is probably wearing his name tag. He will probably sell it and we'll get it one day, or perhaps they will never sell it. These are great charms. All pilots who fall into the desert – none of them come back with identification. (30-31)

He lives in the desert and creates an alternative identity in which family and nations are irrelevant. He forges his identity through his work and interactions with others. In a way, he chooses his identity. He rejected all national identity and chose to seek refuge in the desert, where identity is irrelevant. His casual attitude towards national allegiances caused him much trouble. He seems to be disgusted with the border politics and wants to live at a place which has no borders. The desert provided him much needed succor:

Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert. ...He even wanted to tribe to take his name, and spent a year on the negotiations. Then Bauchan outdid him, having a type of sand dune named after him. But I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. By the time war arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong anyone, to any nation. (148)

The English Patient denies his origin, place and identity. He visualizes that people of different nationalities should only be regarded as human beings. They should not be categorized on the basis of nation, race, color, or gender. The English Patient being a transnational identity has acquired the languages used in different cultural contexts. He even learns to speak the language of the Bedouins. The Bedouins appropriate the English Patient's knowledge about maps and weapons which made colonization possible and led to the destructive world war. The Bedouins did not bother about the identity of the explorers. According to John Bolland the characters in the villa are victims of the war and their complex heritage causes the identity crisis. He observes:

Nationalism is implicated in their suffering in a number of ways: they are victims of the violence of a war pursued for nationalistic ends; their complex heritage causes problems of identification and allegiance; their stories are linked by the theme of betrayal, which exemplifies the conflict between personal commitment to individual or group and the more abstract allegiance to nationhood and state. (Bolland 30)

According to the English patient, for Bedouins, "We were German, English, Hungarian and African – all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations" (147). Almásy escapes unharmed from a suicidal plane crash instigated by Geoffrey. He then drags Katherine off to a cave and treks through the desert to find medical help. He finds two junior British officers who demanded to show the proof of his identity. He has no identification papers and was dubbed as Austro-Hungarian foreigner. He escapes and gets a safe passage to the cave. He also helps one of the Rommel's spies cross the desert to reach Cairo. He is retrieved from a wreckage of a burning plane. His body is then carried across the North African desert and finally placed on a sickbed in an Italian villa. The blackness of its charred skin connotes the destruction of white civilization by World War II. It also suggests that blackness and whiteness no longer remained distinct categories; the Englishman has acquired a different identity after colonization. The charred black skin of the English Patient is not English at all. He is an amalgam of decentred identities. He desires anonymity and seeks to forget his own identity. The plane crash accident helps him to achieve this aim.

The English Patient's past is blank. He does not know about his origin or ancestry. He believes that nations are dangerous inventions and that love can transcend time and geography. His identity remains fluid. Edward Said has rightly pointed out that "having lost his sense of belonging, the nowhere man is obliged to roam the earth, to slip across borders" (Said 332).

The English Patient or Almásy undermines the idea of monolithic identity as Hungarian national identity is highly complex and ambivalent. The English Patient acknowledges his ability to speak German upon his arrival at the Allies hospital. He provides a clue to his cultural identity by referring to the Habsburg empires Germanic centre, Vienna. He knows a lot about different places and events in the world. The English Patient's reference to his knowledge about England seems to be an attempt to avert the suspicion of having collaborated with the Nazi Germany. Ondaatje portrays the identity crisis of Almásy who is trapped by the atrocious events of war. The war has instigated them to leave his homeland and work in unknown alien lands. This became psychologically disoriented as they endure the trauma in the aftermath of the death of his most loved one. Thus the novel seeks to explore the identity crisis and displacement, experienced both by colonizer and colonized. Ondaatje cross cultural inheritance, his migrant status and complexities of identities are frequently reflected in the novel.

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