

In-Between Identity: A Postcolonial Study Of Characters In *The English Patient*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the identity crisis in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* from the postcolonial perspective. This novel has been discussed through the concept of nationalism, therefore gave more concentration towards the cultural, psychological, and physical displacement due to colonization, exploration, and the shifting notion from one place to another place. In my analysis of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, I will discuss how identity is reconstructed among four characters who are avoiding many lost aspects of their previous lives in an Italian villa during World War II. By using mainly the tools of postcolonial criticism and new historicism, this thesis will focus on how the characters unsuccessfully try to escape their names/labels, bodies, and places of origin while reconstructing identity. I argue that the novel is mostly about resisting the Eurocentric view of the world, while that it focusing on human relationships and human resilience. Eventually, after the bombs are dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the English patient is assumed by the reader to die in the Italian villa. The surviving characters Kip, Hana, and Caravaggio decide to return to the countries where they were born, where they feel that they belong.

KEYWORDS: Historiographic, Metafiction, Inter-Textuality, Ex-Centric, Identity, Trans-Cultural/Transnational, Postmodernism

In the novel *The English Patient*, identity crisis and displacement were the two most prominent themes which have been depicted by Michael Ondaatje. The story of this novel was concerned to exhibit the struggles and sufferings about the problem of identity crisis and displacement experienced by both the colonizer and the colonized people. In this novel, the main characteristics of identity were related to the social construct where the relationship between self and others are the two salient issues. The sense of belonging is based on the concept of our identity since we are members of different ethnic groups or nations. Because of social classes, the nations are also like communities that can provide a sense of belonging via the individual's notion of conduct towards his or her fellow men. In other words, we can say, "Individuals think that they are a part of one collective body, namely, a community known as a nation, which is in fact an idea".

The concept of nation and nationalism are necessary elements towards the imperialist's expansion which has emerged from Western capitalization. But to bring the national liberation and the concept of nation and nationalism which has been rooted in Western capitalization. Therefore became the failure one. That kind of failure happened despite the heterogeneous groups of people called anti-colonial nationalism in the former colonies who were stood against the imperialist ruling power. Both of the parties such as colonial or anti-colonial groups have been considered as essentialists and racists based on their support of the ruling elite but ignored the lesser-known ethnic groups. *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje has created about this nation and nationalism that formed the identities via colonial and anti-colonial nationalism. In this novel, all the characters were exhibited as exiled persons from their homeland who has lived together at the Villa San Girolamo at the end of World War II.

Identity is largely determined by the relationship between self and others. The issue of identity crisis is presented in the novel through various characters. The characters in the villa are from different countries and having different nationalities and different cultural backgrounds. But here in the villa their nationalism and personal identities are crushed. Their new place of belonging and newly formed identities is confusing. Each character is affected by the issue of an identity crisis.

The war has affected all the characters physically as well as mentally. Hana is the youngest and the only female character in the novel. Her physicality changes significantly with the Second World War; when she comes to the villa: “half child and half adult” (14) and is transformed into a woman. Before staying in the villa with three men, Hana had become pregnant. She was not prepared psychologically nor environmentally to take care of the child during the war. At that time she was ready to undergo a change in her identity which resulted in abortion: “I lost the child. I mean I had to lose it. The father was already dead. There was a war.” (82) The identity of Hana is questioned when she thinks about her golden life in Canada. She was affected psychologically as she lost all her relationships in the world. Hana also obtained a polytrophic identity as like *The Patient English*. She is left behind in her voluntary exile in the Italian villa: “I wanted to go home and there was no one at home. I was sick of Europe. Sick of being treated like gold because I was female.” (90-91)

Hana is introduced to the most heinous scenes of the Second World War as she was carrying for the soldiers for three days without sleep. She also faced the death of her unborn child’s father and abortion. Hana changes her physical appearance by chopping her hair: “when

she works, she picked up a pair of scissors out of the porcelain box, leaned over and began to cut her hair, not concerned with the shape or length, just cutting it away—the irritation of its presence during the previous days still in her mind—when she had bent forward and her hair had touched blood in the wound. She would have nothing to link her, to lock her, to death. She gripped what was left to make sure there were no more strands turned again to face the rooms full of the wounded[...] she never looked at herself in the mirror again.” (49-50)

Death has traumatically affected Hana. She decides to alienate herself from her body image. Although she decides to ignore her reflection in the mirror that does not mean she does not exist: she had refused to look at herself for more than a year now, and then just her shadow on the walls. The mirror revealed only her cheek, she had to move it back to arm's length, her hand wavering.” (52) Hana feels a lack of substance, meaning, or identity in life. She is a lost individual. Hana's reflections do not define her body. Even though her reflection is unfamiliar to her eyes, the memory of the body image is still the reflection of changing identity.

In this regard, there is another character that faced an identity crisis is *The English patient*, Almsy who has an interest in maps, books, stories, events. Due to his apparent British education and accent, he was known as an English patient after he was completely disfigured by fire. English patient looks like a burned animal. He has with him a copy of Herodotus which reminds him of his own identity. “And his commonplace book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus histories are other fragments—maps, dairies, entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs, cut out of other books. All that is missing is his name. There is still no clue to who he actually is, nameless without rank or battalion or squadron.” (96)

The issue of identity crisis is also presented through the character of Kip, the sapper. His real name is Kripal Singh, the only non-English member in the villa. He tried to retrieve his identity that he left for war and felt the frustration of non-belonging in Italy. Kip realizes that the British will never accept him truly. Kip thinks that the English expect them to fight from their side but they are not willing to talk to them. Hana watches Kip's darker brown color of his body and his turban. Hana remarks these as symbols of his eastern identity: "when he steps into the seemingly empty villa he is noisy. He is the only one of them who has remained in uniform. Immaculate, buckles, shined, the sapper appears out of his tent, his turban symmetrically layered, the boots clean and banging into the wood or stone floors of the house" (74)

Unlike Hana, Caravaggio's self is altered by his change in appearance. Not only has his physical appearance changed in years but also their relationship. Caravaggio was born in Italy but he stayed in Canada. Caravaggio is a postmodern traveler, who has chosen to remain nomadic. He has worked with the intelligence department in Cairo and Italy. Caravaggio has suddenly become the important thing as thieves can read through the camouflage of deceit more naturally than official intelligence. David Caravaggio is a Canadian thief, the captive of Germany have imputed his both thumbs. He is troubled by the bandaged hands which reminds him of torture. The English patient teases him as his name sounds vague, Caravaggio replies: "At least I have a name." (116) He says it is better to have a name and identity than not having both.

In the novel, Ondaatje frequently expressed sympathy for outsiders. Almasy wants to save Katherine after the plane crash but fails. Almasy hates nations and nationalities: "By 1932, Bagnold was finished and Madox and the rest of us were everywhere. Looking for the lost army

of Cambyses. Looking for zezura. 1932 and 1933 and 1934. Not seeing each other for months. Just the Bedouins and us, crisscrossing the forty days. There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I've met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, and African-all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became motionless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations." (138)

Katherine is an oxford educated woman who finds herself in the desert not by choice but in the company of her husband Geoffrey, who is also a part of the British aristocracy. They seem happily married, but Katherine's affair with Almasy reveals another side of her, mostly wild and passionate. Katherine's relation with Almasy is full of obsession, anger, and jealousy. While Almasy is jealous of her husband she is jealous of his adoration of the desert: "But she was a woman who had grown in gardens, among moistness, with words like trellis and hedgehog. Her passion for the desert was temporary. She'd come to love its sternness because of him, wanting to understand his comfort in its solitude. She was always happier in rain, in bathrooms steaming with liquid air, in sleepy wetness, climbing back in from his window that rainy night in Cairo and putting on her clothes while still wet in order to hold it all." (181)

Madox is another character who suffered an identity crisis. He is a member of the exploration team. His identity is also crushed. He kills himself because he is disappointed by English nationalism and national identity. He hates such a kind of nationalism that respects war than civilization. Ondaatje's technique of putting epigraphs to his works enables his readers to unravel the hidden links to the multilayered tales. The Patient English opens with an epigraph taken from the minutes of the geographical society meeting in London of early nineteen forties:

“most of you, I am sure, remember the tragic circumstances of the death of Geoffrey Clifton at Gilf Kebir, followed later by the disappearance of his wife, Katherine Clifton, which took place during 1939 desert expedition in search of Zerzura”

The mysterious identities raise a question regarding the national identity:” while some characters that appear in this book are based on historical figures...It is important to stress that this story is a fiction and that the portraits of characters that appear in it are fictional, as are some of the events and journey.” (322)

In the novel, another character whose identity is crushed is Geoffrey Clifton. In the novel, Micheal Ondaatje presents a colonialist British character. He praises his wife’s beauty with words. He as a British colonizer always controls the situation. It is a type of colonial domination by the colonizers. Naming, mappings are signs and tools of colonizers. He names the base campsite as Bir Messaha country club without the consent of the natives: “I name this site the Bir Messaha country club.” (142) “He has named his plane Rupurt Bear.”(143)

The characters in *The English Patient* attempt to reconstruct single identities that cannot exist. The character's inability to escape from the outside world is highlighted in the novel. They cannot deny existing differences between their cultures and national identities that invade their peaceful isolated villa. The issues of national identity and narration of history have been explored as the elements of colonial nationalism.

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