

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992): The Question of Identity

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Abstract

The main objective of the present paper is to demonstrate the extent to which the question of identity is key to contemporary concerns, particularly in the context of the postcolonial novel. With this in mind, I argue that Michael Ondaatje's novel entitled the English Patient (1992) offers articulations of identity that dismantle conventional notions of fixity and rigidity and that reinterpret identity as porous, fluid, hybrid, and complex formations that are irreducible to one single homogenous strand. The emphasis on the complexity that is intrinsic to identity-formation is crucial to fostering greater awareness of colonial and imperial discourses, giving rise to other voices in the knowledge-making processes, hence critical illumination. The paper, therefore, is a contribution to postcolonial studies, particularly in relation to identity as a concept.

Keywords: *Identity, Postcolonial Novel, Hybrid, Fluidity, English Patient.*

Introduction

In this research paper, the question of identity occupies the central core aspect of the discussion, shedding a flood of light on the ways identity as a concept is indispensable to the knowledge-making process in the postcolonial realm. The discussion is in essence praxis-oriented, attempting to identify a range of ways, challenges, or changes that identity as a concept assist in bringing about to deliberation. The discussion commences with an overall view of the major statements in postcolonialism, particularly in terms of identity as a concept. In addition, the paper is anchored in postcolonial moorings, in particular work by renowned critics and thinkers such as Edward William Said, Frantz Fanon, Benedict Anderson, and others. The theoretical terrain in which the paper is set is followed by a critical engagement with Michael Ondaatje's novel, *The English Patient*. The analysis and interpretations proceed along a close reading of the text, paying attention to certain passages and situations in order to interpolate subtle layers of meaning and implications. In the last section of the paper; namely, the 'conclusion', I intend to raise further questions that the discussion conducted in my paper makes possible. The paper, thus, is a contribution to contemporary debates on postcolonial fiction, as well as on identity and nations as concepts.

Contemporary literary theory marks the qualitative changes that have characterized the contemporary era, and radical transformations in the ways of thinking and seeing reality, language, literature, meaning, history, society, and other hitherto-taken for granted assumptions. A wide array of critical approaches arise on the scene, calling into question the nature and usefulness of conceptions while paving the way of other alternative perspectives to emerge, with a view to fostering greater consciousness, particularly in relation to imperial and colonial discourses. From Russian Formalism and Anglo-American School of New Criticism to Structuralism, Poststructuralism (or Deconstruction), to Reader-Response Theory, New historicism, Cultural Materialism, Eco-Criticism and Postcolonialism, among the many, are fresh avenues of critical exploration for the sake of critical illumination. For the purposes of the present paper, I focus on Postcolonial theory, particularly in terms of identity.

Postcolonialism identifies the extent to which language, nationality, ethnicity, marginality, and race are crucial factors in promoting, or blocking awareness of grievances that are often imposed by centres of power the world-over. A wide array of inquiries have been raised as to investigated the nature and usefulness of existing (often dominant) modes of thinking and seeing the world. In addition, possibilities of change

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and challenge have been central to the postcolonial; precisely because, awareness-raising is the ultimate aim of knowledge formation across the board.

Identity as a concept incurs interrogation and reconsideration in contemporary epistemology. It invites a great deal of thinking and rethinking in work by major thinkers and critics. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), for example, stresses the psych-pathology of colonialism, particularly in terms of identity, as is often clear in terms of white superiority in contrast to black inferiority complex. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986), Fanon calls upon the colonized to reclaim their identities by means of raising awareness of the ways in which cultural identity is crucial to one's positioning in the world. In the same vein, Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) discloses many a challenge to Eurocentric notions particularly in the context of cultural identity. According to Said,

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of other... the Orient was organized not only because it was discovered to be "oriental" in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be –that is, submitted to being—made oriental.

Said's commentary indicates very clearly not just the constructed nature of identity but also the way it is made, remade, and unmade in order to serve the exclusive purposes of the Eurocentric enterprises.

Identity is a social construct that is formed in the relationship between the self and the other. Identity, thus conceived and conceptualized, bestows a sense of belonging upon its claimers in relation to other communities—ethnic, religious, national, political, or cultural (Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 1983; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 1983; Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Traditions*, 1983). The fact that such constructed notions to bring together collectivities of human beings is so interesting and thought-provoking; simply because, it brings in matters of differential power relations as well as possibilities of change, challenge, or transformation. In other words, postcolonial concepts, in particular identity, have an intimate nexus with world politics and power configurations and differentials.

In his seminal essay entitled "DissemiNation: time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation", Homi K. Bhabha makes the argument that nationalist representations are ever shifting and open to contestation; precisely because, they cannot forge a collective national consciousness owing to the ambivalence of national discourse. At the heart of this ambivalence resides the fact that nationalism as a "pedagogic discourse", entailing an unbroken, or undisrupted history wherein past and present are inextricable in a linear, temporal order. Yet, nationalist articulations are also "performative discourses", implying that constructions, in particular nations and identities, are subject to change, subversion, and interrogation. According to Bhabha,

We are confronted with nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The barred Nation it/Self, alienated from its eternal self-generation, becomes a liminal signifying space that is internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference.

The liminality that Bhabha highlights above is key to gaining a better understanding that everything in time changes, that concepts are constructs are not natural but are impositions with political, or ideological inclinations, and that human existence is prone to adaptations and transformations with differing degrees in kind and scope. These observations, as will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper, are key concerns in postcolonial theory, particularly in the context of novel.

Ondaatje's *The English Patient* depicts a series of stories and characters in the aftermath of World War II, who have gone through many a challenge and ordeals, and who get together now in a secluded villa for safety, recovery, or as a point of departure for a new move to another place. Shattered by the multifarious horrors of the war, the interaction of the four main characters displays the cognitive perplexity they are made to undergo on the one hand, and the existential angst imposed on them as survivors of the war. As

will be discussed in greater detail below, the question of identity is the heart of the matter, for it lays bare what it takes to be a human being especially at critical moments in one's life. Such radical changes are best described in the words of Jean Luc Nancy as follows:

...history can no longer be presented as [...] a 'grand narrative', the narrative of some grand, collective destiny of mankind (of Humanity, of Liberty, etc.), a narrative that was grand because it was great, and that was great because its ultimate destination was considered good. Our time is the time, when this history at least has been suspended: total war, genocide, the challenge of nuclear powers, implacable technology, hunger, and absolute misery, all these are, at the least, evident signs of self-destroying mankind, of self-annihilating history.

An important aspect of *The English Patient* is the fact that it defies generic conventions, particularly in terms of the art of characterization, narration and setting. A close enough attention at the novel displays that there is no clear-cut narration, no linear progression of event, or obvious plot. Linda Hutcheon, in *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, writes that: "historiographic metafiction plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record. In novels like *Foe*, *Burning Water*, or *Famous Last Words*, certain known historical details are deliberately falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error. "

In what follows, I attempt to attend critically to *The English Patient*, particularly in relation to focus on four characters—Hana, Kip, *The English Patient*, and Caravaggio. I consider the ways in which the identities of these characters are changed or challenged in the course of the novel. I focus on each one of these personages, investigation the extent to which his/her identity is subverted; with the implication that identity is not something that is fixed once and for all; but rather, that there is always a scope for transformation. This change in identity is a result of a reinterpretation of one's own new positioning, a new awareness gained owing to some experience confronted by the character, or at least, for purposes of self-maintenance and continuity in the face of adversity.

Analysis and Interpretations

Part of the challenge any engagement with *The English Patient* encounters has much to do with the fact that, the novel is a compendium of texts that are intricately interwoven and that contribute significantly to the creation not just of suspense but also – perhaps more importantly – of a sense of human existence as a conundrum beyond simplified forms of understanding and comprehension. With this in mind, I argue that the novel transgresses temporal and spatial boundaries in order to convey an eloquent sense of the world as a composite of an irreducible whole. The novel, nonetheless, may be interpreted as a self-sufficient world, an autonomous entity with its own inner mechanisms and rules. Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, it is very clear, is aesthetically-motivated, endowing upon its reader a profound sense of the thrill of the experience of literature. The craft of fiction is clear and evident all throughout the novel particularly in terms of its own textuality. Qadri Ismail, in an essay entitled 'Discipline and Colony: *The English Patient* and the crow's nest of postcoloniality', makes the illuminating observation:

[This is] not simply a novel, a self-contained or bounded whole...[*The English Patient*] relentlessly asserts its textuality, its unboundedness: it demands to be read against – alongside as well as in opposition to – many other texts. In so doing, *The English Patient* insists that the responsive reader seek...biographical information...and reminds us of the intertextuality of every novel; in making demands of the reader, it privileges the reader over the author, the text over the work; separates...author from work. It challenges, in other words, the protocols of the very discipline that enables it – literature, which (still) insists upon the irreducible singularity of the novel (coded as the 'work').

That is to say, the novel crosses the established conventions of fiction-writing, thus raising questions more than offering solutions. The anti-canonical rethinking, as implied in the commentary above, adds more to the challenge as well as the thrill of experiencing literature as crystallized in *The English Patient*.

The English Patient

The English Patient, Count Ladislaus de Almásy, retells his story based on his diaries, and continues to take morphine as a result of the incredible suffering he is made to undergo. Almásy is a member of a group of desert explorers who are not identified to belong to a clear-cut identity—Hungarian, English, African or Arab in a quest for Zerzura, a lost oasis in the 1930s (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 138). Almásy, however, joins the Cliftons, wherein hatred grows between him and Clifton over the latter's wife, Katharine. But this soon grows into a passionate adulterous fervor. Upon finding out his wife's adultery with Almásy, Clifton attempts to get rid of them and kill them with his plane. Almásy and Katharine survive the crash to the death of Clifton. Katharine is badly injured, and is therefore left in a cave so that Almásy goes in search for a way of transportation. To his sheer disappointment, he is denied assistance by a military English group. Nonetheless, Almásy helps the Germans in reaching Cairo in return for offering him a means of transportation.

Almásy returns in 1942 to the Cave of Parimmers, painting Katharine over the cave's painting. Trying to carry Katharine's dead body in a plane, though to his utter disappointment the plane catches fire. Almásy gets rescued by some travelers in the heart of the desert:

Where was he? What civilization was this that understood the predictions of whether and light? El Ahmar or El Abyadd, for they must be one of the northwest desert tribes....His favorite garden in the world had been the grass garden at Kew, the colours so delicate and various like ash on a hill. (Ondaatje, pp. 8-9)

The significance of the question of identity in the novel is made clear and evident, particularly in the context of the desert where the identity of the English patient and the travellers is backgrounded and eluded for addressing wider questions of saving a human soul beyond all narrow sectarian imperative and national boundaries. The blurring of identity in this context, however, entails the weight the novelist attaches to identity.

The multiple character of Almásy's identity, as the novel suggests so subtly, is almost a leitmotif and a definitive statement that can be perceived in connection with other characters, in particular Hana and Kip, as well.

Hana

The second resident of the villa is Hana, who is depicted as a nurse in the service of the wounded during the war. She herself is made to suffer a great deal of ordeal, especially in terms of the loss of her father, husband, and unborn child. Her state of mind, therefore, is not sound or healthy; yet, she continues to nurse whoever in need of her services, in particular the English patient, Almásy. Totally dissatisfied with the tragedies she witnesses with her own naked eyes, Hana makes up her mind to eliminate her identity by cutting her hair and smashing the mirror:

When she woke, she picked up a pair of scissors out of the porcelain bowl, leaned over and began to cut her hair, not concerned with 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 a 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 and turned again to face the rooms full of the wounded. [...] She never looked at herself in mirrors again. (Ondaatje, pp. 49-50)

This is a very important moment in *The English Patient*; precisely because, it captures glimpses of the novel's undertones as stressing the need to go beyond notions of identity as static and fixed once and for all to the need for embracing new identities of trans-national boundaries. In other words, Hana's willing change of her appearance and refusal to remember her original self (by breaking down the mirrors) bespeak the urgency of the hour for a more dynamic, all-inclusive identities that foster awareness of transcending the self and embracing the other. This is even more vivid and lucid in Hana's letter to her mother at the end of the novel:

I am sick of Europe, Clara. I want to come home. To your small cabin and pink rock in Georgian Bay. I will take a bus up to parry Sound. And from main land send a message over the shortwave radio out towards the pancakes. And wait for you, wait to see the silhouette of you in a canoe coming to rescue me in front of his place we all entered, betraying you. (Ondaatje, p. 296)

However, it must be stressed here that, Hana's psychological instability is best translated in her inability to make decisions clearly. To put it a bit differently, Hana's letters to Kip (Kirpal Singh, the bomb defuser, and a resident of the villa) suggest that she is hesitant as to take up a new identity, preferring to stick to her identity and retrieving her established identitarian character. This is, nevertheless, is explicable in the context of the intolerable traumatic experiences she has been made to encounter and endure.

The significance of the excerpt above lies in the fact that it displays a profound sense of disenchantment with the centre; that is, a new level of awareness that Hana has gained as a result of her real-life encounters and experience of the ramifications of Eurocentric modes of living and thinking. As will be discussed in greater detail below the war as the background to the novel serves to remove the fog screen from the characters' eyes, making visible (atrocities and brutalizing practices of imperial powers), thereby exposing the barbarity of hegemonic forces as well as revealing the valueless of human life.

Kip

The third resident of the villa is Kip, a Sikh and a sapper in the British Army. Initially, he uphold the values of the colonizers to the detriment of traditionally-held norms of his own society. Kip acclimatizes himself with Lord Suffolk's family, imbibing English values and hence is often addressed as Hardy, or a fellow sapper. Moreover, Lord Suffolk and his fellows bestow upon Kip a sense of identity; as a result, his name changes from Kirpal Singh to Kip. This cultural assimilation into the English culture is best seen in Kip's imitation of Hardy to the extent of evening singing the same song--"They're changing guard at Buckingham palace/Christopher Robin went down with Alice" (Ondaatje, p. 211). The radical moment of the demise of Lord Suffolk and his assistant, Miss Morden is transformative, for it makes Kip leave the bomb disposal unit and join the sappers in the Italian campaign; hence, another layer of identity configuration.

The temporary suspension of cultural identity is a question of celebration in *The English Patient*. Kip's stay at the villa with Hana, Almasy (the English patient) and Caravaggio reconstitutes relationships with colonizers 'under erasure', which is particularly portrayed in the context of Kip's throwing of a party for Hana's birthday. The party entails the getting together of different identity formations that is made possible by the temporary suspension of their original identities.

The bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki provokes a crisis, disrupting the peace of the villa. The news of the nuclear bomb turns Kip against the West, especially the English. This new disillusionment does not just indicate the ambivalence in his position, but it also invites reconsideration of his own traditional identity: "His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here" (Ondaatje, p. 281). However, later in the novel we come to know that Kirpal (not Kip) is a doctor, and is married to a brown women, and is endowed with two children. This entails an affirmation of his original identity (Sikh) as a ramification of a disillusionment with acquired identity (English), as is crystal clear in Kip's own words below:

My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them. But we, oh, we were easily impressed by speeches and medals and your ceremonies. What have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil, For what? For his to happen? (Ondaatje, pp. 284-85)

The new level of awareness that Kip has acquired, as clearly stated in the passage above, does not just account for the fact that he returns to the nationalist ideology that his family uphold strongly, but it also promotes the need for an ideological struggle against Eurocentric dominance, which has for long established an unjust world order, and which has bifurcated the world in the west and the rest, maintaining the exclusive interests of the former and relegating to the margins of history the latter. The question of

identity, in this context, is crucial, for it assists in recirculating and inculcating challenging possibilities of thinking and seeing the world.

Caravaggio

The fourth resident of the villa, Caravaggio, Italian-Canadian, is portrayed as a spy working for the Allies, in particular the British, in Cairo. Once detained, Caravaggio is threatened with the elimination of his thumbs if he does not reveal secret information, thereby he succumbs to disclose identities. Like other personages, he is obsessed with the memory of his torture and suffering. In the villa, Caravaggio is depicted as an interrogator of the English patient, at times revealing truth, and at other times falsifying other bits. This, I argue, is a very ingenious skill of Ondaatje's art of characterization; because, it suggests that history—oral or written—is very often replete with distortions, twists, additions, or deletions. The unreliability that penetrates the story of the English patient as the conversation with Caravaggio may indicate is a subtle call for the need of taking a critical distance and perspective. In other words, the way history is narrated, or re-narrated in fiction, is often manipulated – though very subtly – in ways that serve the purposes of certain groups at the cost of others.

As is quite obvious, all the four characters go through moments of transformation, disbelief, shock, or suspension of belief exclusively on account of the agonies inflicted upon them during the World War II. The ambivalent character of their identities, or identity crisis, is a consequence of the appalling experiences of the war, and a cause of disillusionment with established identities, though 'under erasure'. The destabilization that the war brings about and the instability of identities that the novel portrays at the personal level of each of the discussed characters are correlated to the extent that one can argue that the disturbance that each personage in the novel goes through is a miniature of the wider fallout of the war. In other words, identity crisis in *The English Patient* is symptomatic of the larger chaos and upheaval in the world, and is best crystallized in the art of characterization in the novel.

Conclusion

As is quite obvious, the paper has offered a postcolonial reading of Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, particularly in the terms of its art of characterization. The theoretical context I have used is anchored in notions of identity. The investigation has made clear that the novel poses a considerable degree of complexity as is often perceived in the metaphors of space captured in the novel. The trans-national architectonic of the fiction in hands is worth further considerations. The following is a synopsis of the main directions of inquiry that have been addressed throughout the paper.

The literatures of the last few decades have very significantly captured glimpses of the radical transformations that have characterized contemporary experience across the board. Traditionally taken-for-granted assumptions—such as narration as linear, or more importantly identity as fixed once and for all—have been interrogated, and been replaced with new ways of thinking. Identity is now conceived and conceptualized as a construct that can be not just deconstructed but also reconstructed. Identity is a fluid, relative, mutable, and multi-character formation is, to a large extent, a dimension of the responses to the appalling experiences of World Wars I and II. The new lines of theorizing identity seek not just to question the validity and reliability of given, imposed, or established identities but also to articulate the need for a more inclusive approach to reality more than ever before. In lieu of exclusionary politics, the postcolonial move towards a more inclusive politics of identity is foregrounded in the art of characterization that Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* offers to its readership.

As has been delineated above, *The English Patient* offers vivid portrayals of characters—Hana, Kip, The English Patient, and Caravaggio— as displaced, transfigured (both mentally and physically) owing to the Second World War. The suffering, that cuts across the lives of all the four characters is what binds them together, and makes possible disillusionment with received identities and affirmation of new identities, thus subverting binary oppositions. The traumatic experiences of the war shake the roots and beliefs, making space for the emergence of new cultural formations, though temporary. The birthday dinner became the

symbol of their friendship. This bond of friendship happened because all the characters lost their identities partially.

Disillusionment with established identities is an effect of an awareness of the availability of other identities, or possibilities of thinking beyond the edges. The birthday dinner that Kip organizes is a metaphoric construct of the possibility of celebrating difference, of the possibility of thinking together differently, of the possibility for humanity to come together as one in diversity. The fragmented identities of the characters is enabling; simply because, it helps the characters see beyond the imposed frames, particularly the frames of Eurocentric ideology and Western superiority. The fragmentation in terms of identities is deployed by the novelist so skillfully in order to assert the need to redefine given, or imposed boundaries that have divided humanity and have culminated in catastrophes of which the World War II is a demonstrative example.

The characters' resort to original identities, in particular Hana and Kip, is worth consideration in its own right. There is no question in my mind that both these characters retrieve their identity after having gone through a series of tragic and appalling experience and having realized that their own established schematic knowledge—existential, linguistic, and socio-cultural assumptions—have in some way or another assisted them in coming to terms with their own felt and lived experiences. In other words, the traumas of the War have shocked the faith of the characters in the usefulness of the modern (or Eurocentric dominance) to the service and well-being of humanity. The characters, as a result of their experienced agonies, find it better to them to return to their original identities; at least, they are quite familiar with their former identities. Most definitely, there is much more to it than a few words can serve to explicate.

The question of identity in the context of *The English Patient* is a worthwhile exploration into a myriad of questions that are of topical relevance to human existence, in particular the present times. The extent to which the novel highlights the multitude of ways that identity can go through, or forms it can assume, is crucial to perceiving the complexity of the world we inhabit today. The novel engages with identity as a concept across a broad spectrum of tools, devices, metaphors of space and time in order to attach great weight to the question of identity as part and parcel of it means and takes to be a human being in a conflict-ridden world like ours.

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