

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

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze identity crisis in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* from a postcolonial perspective through the concept of nationalism and national identity, emphasizing cultural, psychological and physical displacement due to colonization, travelling, exploration and space / place (cartography), referring to the theories and views of Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, Franz Fanon, Edward Said, and so on.

The paper will mainly focus on the erasure of the national identities and selves of a group of European explorers, scientists and spies, including the colonized Kip, an Indian, serving as a bomb defuser in the British Army. Even though these scientists' mission is to map the desert, they can hardly achieve it. The desert is uncontrollable and unreliable because of sand storms. Its surface changes rapidly and one can be lost forever. In other words, the desert is the metaphor of their unreliable national identities that are fragmented and varied because of their traumatic personal experiences in this alien landscape and culture. The paper will emphasize the fragility of identities and selves even for those who represent European civilization and Imperial Rule as hegemonic powers together with the colonized Kip who is shaped by these powers as a hybrid identity.

**Key Words:** hybridity, nationalism, national identity, postnationalism, space / place

*The English Patient* is a novel that seeks to explore the problem of identity and displacement, experienced both by colonizer and colonized. As known, identity is a social construct and largely determined by the relationship between self and other. It is through our sense of identity that we identify ourselves as members of various ethnic groups or nations as well as social classes which provide us with a sense of belonging. Likewise, nations are communities which provide a sense of belonging through the individual's feeling of connectedness to his or her fellow men. In other words, individuals think that they are a part of one collective body, namely, a community known as nation, which is in fact an idea, defined by Benedict Anderson as "an imagined political community" (6). The survival of nations depend upon invention and performance of traditions, histories, symbols which help people sustain their identity. However, it mostly depends on traditions and narration of history, which are central elements. Therefore, national history is important in the sense that it narrates the past as a common experience that belongs to a community. It creates one particular version of the past and identity to constitute a common past and a collective identity of any given community. In other words, nations are "imaginary communities," to use Benedict Anderson's phrase, and nationalism is based on the very concept of a unified imaginary community. Furthermore, nations also provide people with a sense of belonging, connectedness and identity through a shared territory which they believe they own and therefore have the right to separate from other peoples' land by means of borders. As an idea, scholars usually agree that it is Western in origin, that it came into existence with the development of Western capitalism, industrialization and colonial expansion, which paved the way for imperialism.

However, starting with the 90s, nationalism, nation and national identity began to lose their significance as the world was becoming increasingly international, particularly after the period of decolonization. The concept of nation / nationalism and national identity

as Western ideas stimulated colonized peoples to develop their own sense of nationalism and national identity against the colonial, national identity of the West. However, this anti-colonial nationalism could not provide the colonised peoples with a sense of homogeneous national unity due to the diversity of ethnic groups within them, particularly because the elite nationalist rule neglected the subaltern masses and privileged the elite over the subaltern, which turned nationalism into a rule of elite dominations, as argued by Frantz Fanon in his *The Wretched of the Earth*. Hence, there emerged from Western capitalism and colonization the concepts of nation and nationalism as indispensable components of imperialist expansion, but failing to bring national liberation to the heterogeneous groups of people in the former colonies despite their opposition to imperialist domination as anti-colonial nationalism. Be it colonial or anti-colonial, both are essentialist and racist in the sense that they supported the ruling elite while ignoring the less privileged ethnic groups.

*The English Patient* (hereafter will be cited as EP) is a novel that questions the nation and nationalism that shape identities through colonial and anti-colonial nationalisms. The characters are all exiles from their homeland who have gathered together at the Villa San Girolamo at the end of World War II. Hana is a Canadian nurse, who volunteered for war service and who has to have an abortion because the father of her unborn child has been killed. Furthermore, she is on the verge of a nervous breakdown because of the news of her father's death by burns and her continuous dealing with the wounded and the dying. As the Canadian Infantry Division continues to advance in Italy, she stays behind at the villa to nurse a dying burnt man who is called the 'English patient'. The third member of the villa other than these two is Kip, a Sikh, who is a sapper in the British army and finally, Caravaggio, the thief, an Italian-Canadian who was a friend of Hana's father. The novel's central figure is the English patient whose identity is already erased as he is burnt beyond recognition. In fact, he is the Hungarian Court Ladislaus de Almásy, a desert explorer who helped the Germans navigate the deserts. Although his duty is to delineate, name and in a sense possess the unmapped desert, which is a vast territory, in the end his own identity, which is the map of his own features, has been erased and he is known only as the 'English patient'. In fact, the inhabitants of the Villa are all displaced because they are exiles who have found new identities in a place other than their homeland. In a sense, they formed a new community in the Villa, which is like Eden, isolated from the outside world of war and violence. Since the novel questions colonial and anti-colonial nationalism, which shape their identities, it frequently breaks down colonial hierarchies, particularly the imperial conception of space/place through the mapping of the desert, which is an instrument of colonial domination, and the desert's elusiveness because of its vastness and uncontrollable sand storms. In fact, mapping a space means to name it and possess it as it becomes a place as seized territory, which will help invaders, explorers and traders to realize their plans and aspirations. Almásy is aware of the fact that mapping is a form of knowledge for power and domination:

The ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence. On one side servants and slaves and tides of power and correspondence with the Geographical Society. On the other the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight ( by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever. (141)

Obviously, colonial powers constitute oppressive social classes and organizations like the Geographical Society to explore new lands for colonial domination. Almásy also adds that

colonial identity is narcissistic, ready to project its own identity onto anything it possesses as if it were a full, unified self:

When we are young we do not look into mirrors. It is when we are old, concerned with our name, our legend, what our lives will mean to the future. We become vain with the names we own, our claims to have been the first eyes, the strongest army, the cleverest merchant. It is when he is old that Narcissus wants a graven image of himself. (141-42)

However, Almasy is aware of the fact that colonial imposition of fixed meanings on space is meaningless because space is a socio-political construction and named by particular people in relation to their experiences and aspirations throughout history:

So history enters us. I knew maps of the sea floor, maps that depict weaknesses in the shield of the earth, charts painted on skin that contain the various routes of the Crusades. So I knew their place before I crashed among them, knew when Alexander had traversed it in an earlier age for his cause or that greed. I knew the customs of nomads besotted by silk or wells. (18)

The quotation above reflects the transience of empires, nations and civilizations which constitute history. Likewise, identities are also transient and elusive for Almasy:

There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I've met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, African, - all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we become nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations. The desert could not be claimed or owned-it was a piece of cloth carried by the winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treatises quilted Europe and East. Its caravans, those strange rambling feasts and cultures left nothing behind, not an amber. All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape. ...Erase the family name. Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert. (138-9)

As seen, the desert is used as a metaphor that represents transience. It cannot be claimed, owned or defined. Therefore, mapping it, which means ownership and possession as colonial notions, is meaningless. The desert refuses anything artificial such as borders or names as a landscape which is changed continuously by sand storms. Hence, it is a place of freedom where national identities disappear. What Almasy criticizes here is Western nationalism or rather colonial nationalism which imposes artificial borders through mapping and wars simply for money and political power. Therefore, he wants to erase all national identities, constructed by Western nationalism as stable and fixed collective identities, limited to a single, domineering nationality that is responsible for creating artificial borders that divide people. For Almasy, his close friend Madox has died because of nations. In fact, Madox commits suicide after his return to England during the congregation when the priest gives a sermon in honour of war. Being a member of the Geographic Society, Madox obviously believes in Western nationalism with its jingoistic rhetoric of saving the world for civilization and human progress. However, like Almasy, his national identity has been erased during the desert explorations and he kills himself because he feels betrayed by Western nationalism

and national identity which honour war instead of civilization. Like Madox, Almsy also hates his own social identity on which Western nationalism is founded. He is already made up of diverse cultural influences which resist any final definition as he says: "Kip and I are both international bastards-born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere."(176)

Homi Bhabha, in his influential essay, "DissemiNation: time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation," argues that nationalist representations are unstable and fragile constructions, for they cannot produce the sense of national unity to forge a collective national consciousness due to the ambivalence of national discourse. They are ambivalent because nationalism as a "pedagogic discourse" claims a shared, continuous history which links past and present as a linear sequence of time. However, nationalist discourses are also "performative" because they are "repetitious" and "recursive" in the sense that they are open to subtle alterations in the course of time. Nations are constructed continuously by national subjects through new ideas that change their institutions as well. In other words, the nation is never fixed, it is split within itself:

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. (148, italics in the original)

In this respect, the priest's sermon which legitimizes war and violence as a nationalist discourse at the expense of human life is disrupted by Madox's suicide which is a reaction as well as a message, depicting the emergence of counter discourses within the nation which may turn into counter narratives.

Kip, the sapper, is another character with an elusive identity in the novel. He is a young Sikh, a bomb defuser who seems assimilated into English culture. As a colonized, he has a double perspective because of his hybrid, in-between identity which disturbs the binary oppositions of racist and colonial discourses. Kip, who admires his commanding officer Lord Suffolk, seems assimilated into English culture as he is re-named Kip although his real name is Kirpal Singh. His singing of the song: "They're changing guard at Buckingham Palace/ Christopher Robin went down with Alice " (211) is a song his friend Hardy used to sing while he is defusing a bomb, which indicates his mimicry of English culture. However, Kip is a hybrid, an in-between identity even though he seems assimilated into English culture. He experiences disappointments with English culture and finally reverts to his traditional culture as an anti-western Sikh nationalist like his brother. Unlike his brother, however, Kip joins the British army willingly. Yet, he is treated with reservations by his white colleagues. The only place in England where he is unreservedly accepted is Lord Suffolk's household. Lord Suffolk, who becomes Kip's mentor, trainer and surrogate father, is also a bomb defuser. When he and his team are killed while dismantling a new type of bomb, Kip is utterly disappointed with Western civilization and he becomes emotionally withdrawn. He leaves England and goes to Italy to work as a sapper, where he meets Hana, the nurse, and the two become lovers. The Villa is a place, once again, where Kip is unreservedly accepted. He is welcomed by the Western residents in the Villa, namely, Hana, the English patient /Almsy, Caravaggio, the Canadian thief. They even celebrated Hana's 21st birth day, a symbol of their friendship as they all seem to disregard their national and racial origins. The Villa, like the desert, is a place of refuge almost like Eden, where nations, races, anything artificial that divides human beings is meaningless. However, when August comes and Kip

hears the news of atomic bomb dropped on Japan, he becomes enraged, believing that a Western country would never commit such an atrocity against another Western country. Kip also threatens to kill the English Patient, whom he regards as a symbol of the West because he believes he is English. Unfortunately, Kip's generalization against the West, particularly, against the English is racial and aggressive, which is a contrast with the Edenic and peaceful atmosphere of the Villa where racial boundaries do not exist. Kip's anti-Western outburst and his readiness to abandon his Western friends is once again due to his sense of cultural displacement as a consequence of his disappointment with Western culture. As a hybrid identity with a double perspective, he gazes at the photograph of his family as he questions himself: "His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here"(287). Even though his friends call him "Kip," he is no longer Kip, but Kirpal Singh or the sapper till the end of the novel. As a medical doctor and a married man with two children in the last chapter, he is "Kirpal." However, he often remembers Hana and thinks of her and seems to regret his decision to leave her without a word:

It seems every month he witnesses her this way, as if these moments of revelation are a continuation of the letters she wrote to him every year, getting no reply, until she stopped sending them, turned away by his silence. His character, he supposed. Now there are these urges to talk with her during a meal and return to that stage they were most intimate at in the tent or in the English patient's room, both of which contained the turbulent river of space between them. (301-2)

As seen, neither the English Patient as a Westerner nor Kip as a colonized native has a unified, homogenous and stable identity. In fact, the residents of the Villa as displaced individuals far away from their homeland have endured physical and psychological wounds in different ways during the war both as Westerner and colonized native. They try to heal themselves through their friendship while their old identities have dissolved even though Kip reverts back to his traditional national identity. However, as a colonized and hybrid identity, Kip is already an ambivalent character. He is like a mimic man who is "almost the same but not quite" in Bhabha's words (86), for "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace"(86). The menace of mimicry for Bhabha is its double vision (88) which betrays the ambivalence of the colonized subject who can menace the colonizer simply by using the discourse of colonialism as a means of resistance or disobedience. Likewise, Kip who is trained and disciplined in the British Army and who seems to have adopted English customs, suddenly rebels against the West and abandons his Western friends because of his racially based generalization against the West. In other words, he categorizes his friends as colonizers just as all natives are categorized as inferior stereotypes by colonizers, namely, "wild" or "barbaric savages":

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? (284-85)

Frantz Fanon, who refuses the complete, romantic glorification of native traditions and cultures of the past, namely, pre-colonial period, advocates the reform of traditional culture through a modification and reinterpretation of it in order to forge a national consciousness for the indigenous peoples in the present era. He also argues in his *The Wretched of the*

*Earth* that the cultural evolution of the Western-educated native or rather the native, intellectual writer, to constitute an anti-colonial consciousness has three stages: The first one is the assimilation stage in which the native identifies with the colonizing power and its culture more than his own native culture as in the case of Kip, though he is not a writer. The second stage in which the native intellectual remembers his authentic identity, refuses any attempt to assimilate (158-9), as Kip has refused. And finally, in the third stage which is the “combat stage” for Fanon, the intellectual native who is the colonized writer and who is directly involved in the struggle against colonialism together with his fellowmen and “(c)ombat literature, revolutionary literature, national literature emerges” (159). In Kip’s case, he no longer serves in the British Army but works as a medical doctor in his own country. He is married and has two children whose brown skin is emphasized together with their customs and habits in the novel. It is clear that he loves his family and is particularly proud of his son’s wit in the house.

However, even though Fanon suggests the awakening of national consciousness and self-awareness through national liberation against the colonial rule, his concept of national consciousness is not essentialist or racist. On the contrary, it has an international dimension like his concept of a “new humanism”: “Self-awareness does not mean closing doors on communication. Philosophy teaches us on the contrary that it is its guarantee. National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is alone capable of giving us an international dimension” (179). Likewise, Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism*, writes from a similar perspective, citing Fanon as well:

In any case nativism is *not* the only alternative. There is the possibility of a more generous and pluralistic vision of the world, in which imperialism courses on, ... but the opportunities for liberation are open. ...

In this phase *liberation*, and not nationalist independence is the new alternative, liberation which by its very nature involves, in Fanon’s words, a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness (277-78, italics in the original).

Hence, even though Kip’s uncontrollable rage, racially based generalizations, and his reverting to anti-Western national identity seem essentialist and racist, they do not undermine the novel’s postnational approach that emphasizes “the mutual transformation of colonizer and colonized” as the fundamental principle of “postnational/postcolonial ethics of hybridity” (Gandhi 140). Kip, both colonized and hybrid, is already an ambivalent character who fluctuates between two opposing cultures. In fact, the end of the novel is devoted to Kip’s thoughts of Hana and his family in India. Despite his love and affection for his family, particularly for his children, Kip longs to see her, even though he has not replied to any of her letters for a year. He thinks of Hana very often and even wants to communicate with her, which can be regarded as the early signs of his transformation to forge a new “social consciousness beyond national consciousness,” in Fanon’s words, implying the emergence of his postnational identity with a more pluralistic vision of the world in the course of time.

EP is a historiographic metafiction which rejects the concept of history as a single linear authoritative version of the past so as to have a record of multiple voices which constitute an oral record. As a historiographic metafiction, the novel blurs the line between fact and fiction to question the conflict between history’s authoritative versions of the past and oral records based on myths, legends even rumours owing to the difficulty of distinguishing between fact and fiction. Therefore, Herodotus is called both the “father of history” and

“father of lies,” because his book is based on oral sources such as the Gyges and Candules episode. Herodotus’s book is about the resistance of the Greek city states to the Persian Empire, which is an allusion to the resistance to the imperial powers that ruled India and Africa such as the British, or to the Germans and the allies who invaded the African territory during the second World War as narrated in the novel. Since Herodotus’s history is based on oral records rather than factual, written records, it is being referred to as an intertext to show how the authoritative version of the past is controlled by imperial powers just as the mapping of African deserts in the twentieth century by the colonial cartographers betrays the fact that these maps are instruments of colonial expansion and domination and therefore they can never be objective as it is claimed to be.

To conclude, the novel questions nationalism and nations as colonial components and concepts both in the form of colonial and anti-colonial nationalism, which are imaginary, essentialist and racist, causing the destruction of civilizations and suffering to both westerners and colonized subjects such as Almasy, Caravaggio, Hana and Kip. Likewise, the theme of national identity and narration of history are also explored as components of colonial nationalism revealing the fact that neither history nor national or cultural identities are neutral and objective because they cannot provide access to objective truth. Therefore, they are not stable or fixed, but elusive. The novel offers a postnational/postcolonial reading of colonial encounters which puts “emphasis on the mutual transformation of colonizer and colonized,” as in the case of Almasy and Kip, who have experienced a process of identity transformation.

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