
POST COLONIAL PERSPECTIVE OF IDENTITY AND SPACE IN MICHEAL ONDAATJE'S THE ENGLISH PATIENT

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Abstract

The English Patient by Micheal Ondaatje focuses the sense of loss of identity withstands us the major trauma of the modern diaspora. This novel seeks to explore not only the identity and displacement experienced by the colonized but on the other end it focuses on colonizers too. The central notion of this paper is to analyze identity crisis in the novel The English Patient from the postcolonial perspective through the concept of nationalism and national identity. It also focuses 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 diffuser in the British army. Even though the scientist mission is to map the desert they can hardly achieve it. The desert in the novel stands as the metaphor with symbolizes the unreliable national identities that scattered and diffused by their traumatic personal experiences at the alien land.

Key Words: Nationalism, Postcolonial, Traumatic, Explorers.

Introduction

In *The English Patient*, the space of exile is the war-torn landscape as the allies move up into northern Italy at the end of the Second World War. The novel takes place in a deserted Italian villa named villa San Giroloma and in the Sahara desert, Canada, America, England and Asia. All these countries are represented by bringing together characters from various nations with various identities and negotiating their multicultural zones. The aforementioned villa is later converted into a war hospital. The novel is a confluence of four characters Hana, a Canadian born Italian nurse, Caravaggio, a spy and a thief who is Hana's father's friend, Almsy the titular character who also happens to be her well-wisher and Kip, an Indian Sikh who is posted at Italy as a

member of the bomb diffuser squad. The novel abounds in short, ecstatic and thrilling moments that they share in the villa, which propels the story forward. Later the theme evolves in accordance with the postmodern pretext. 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). 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 anticolonial nationalism could not provide the colonized 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 anticolonial 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.

Discussion

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 Count 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. (EP141)

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, and the cleverest merchant. It is when he is old that Narcissus wants a graven image of himself. (141-42)

However, Almásy 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 nation less. 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 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)

The desert refuses anything artificial such as borders or names as a landscape, which is changed continuously by sand-storm. Hence, it is 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 nation. In fact, Madox commits suicide after his return to England after attending a congregation when a priest gives a sermon in honor 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 exploration and he kills himself because he feels betrayed by Western nationalism and national identity that honor war instead of civilization. Like Madox, Almasy also hates his own social identity. The analysis of the anti-nationalist discourse in *The English Patient* may go further. Thus, it is shown how the characters from the novel whose lives cross at villa San Girolamo, have all broken the links that joined them to their original homeland. But this does not refer to the empirical fact that they are in a foreign country; on the contrary, it is an uprooted feeling, deep and permanent from an existential viewpoint.

The novel has multidimensional themes that form its structure. The tale is sensational and intensely passionate. The novel ends in oppression towards imperialism. Thus, the author in the novel employs many postmodern themes and technique. Frantz Fanon 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 of 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 intellectually remembers his authentic identity, refuses any attempt to assimilate, as Kip has refused. And finally, in the third stage which is the "combat stage" 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". 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 "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." Likewise Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism*, writes from a similar perspective, was 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. (54)

Liberation, which by its very nature involves, in Fanon's words, a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness is the new attractive to Nationalist Independence. 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 post national identity with a more pluralistic vision of the world in the course of time.

Conclusion

Thus, *The English Patient* is a historiographic metafiction, which rejects the concept of history as a single linear authoritative version of the past 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 version of the past and oral records based on myths, legends even rumors 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. To conclude, the novel questions nationalism and nations as colonial components and concept both in the form of colonial and anti-colonial nationalism, which are imaginary, essentialist and racist, causing the destruction of civilization and suffering to both Western and colonized subjects such as Almasy, Caravaggio, Hana and Kip. In the same way the theme of national identity and narration of history are also explored as components of colonial nationalism revealing the fact neither historical nor national or cultural identities are neutral and objective. The novel offers a post national/postcolonial reading of colonial encounters which puts "emphasis on the mutual transformation of colonizer and colonized".

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