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IDENTITY AND EXILE IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S "THE ENGLISH PATIENT"

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is analyze identity and exile in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* from a postcolonial and postmodern perspective through the concept of nationalism, and national identity, emphasizing culture, colonialism, travelling, exploration and space/place, with reference to the theories of Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhaba. The paper will mainly focus on the erasure of the national identities and selves of a group of European explorers, scientist and spies. Even though these scientists' mission is to map the desert, they can hardly achieve it. The desert is the metaphor of their unreliable national identities that are fragmented and varied because of their traumatic personal experiences in this non-native landscape and culture.

Key Word: nationalism, national identity, post nationalism, space / place

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One of the major traumas of the modern diaspora is the sense of loss of identity. Many writers are concerned specifically with the "migrant condition" and the sense of alienation inherent with relocation. Just as in *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon insists on a sense of national identity of national consciousness that gives form to "that revolutionary capital which is the people" so a loss of that identity can be the foundation of trauma. The predicament of exile can in itself be accompanied by the sense of oppression and of injustice.

The politics of one's country and home is a dimension that has been explored in many facets in *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje.

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.

The atmosphere presented in the novel is the picture of the post-war period. The novel highlights the multicultural unison of the four major characters portrayed in the novel. The migrants do not belong to Italy but find a new life in the deserted home. The novel seeks to explore two aspects of circle and development. The group at San Girolamo is all exiles from their homeland. The burnt English patient also does not have any sense of belonging. The desert expeditions have made him feel alien. The theme of disillusionment and nihilism after the Second World War is the highlight of the novel.

An Italian nurse Hana from Ondaatje's previous novel *In the Skin of a Lion* is posted at Italy during the Second World War. Personally, she is depressed because of her father and her husband's death. Her father has died in a fire accident and her husband in the war. She voluntarily undergoes abortion and serves the soldiers in the Italian villa. She is posted as a war nurse treating the dying soldiers in the deserted Italian villa. After the war, most of the soldiers go back but Hana is compassionate towards one particular patient known as the English patient, the protagonist of the novel who fell from a burning plane, charred beyond recognition. When the novel begins, the completely dying English patient is carried by the Bedouin tribes and brought to the villa. Hana nurses him, feeds him and reads to him. She has some devotion for this dying patient whom she considers a saint. Hana is a blessing in disguise to the English patient, who is grateful to her. She does not know his real identity. She feels that her service to the dying patient is a sort of devotion and dedication to the memory of her loving father.

Ondaatje has outlined a number of important themes. Among these race, ethnicity, identity, history, nationalism, colonialism, and war are the most important. The postmodern and postcolonial theme and techniques employed in the novel explore the ways in which they expound the theme and question the notion of identity, crisis that is an aspect of multicultural society. Postmodern techniques such as narrative discontinuity, mini-narratives, fragmented story line, decentered and dehumanized subject, the absence of single truth and multiple identities form a backdrop in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Multiculturalism is one of the postmodern tools used in the novel. The issue of identity is of primary importance in the cosmopolitan contemporary world characterized by blending of cultures and globalization.

The identity of the characters is constructed in the novel with the help of postmodern tools. Postmodern authors focus on the formation of individual and collective identity. For the poststructuralists identity is unstable, changing and decentered. An individual may be identifiable as having a certain age, class, religion, ethnicity, or gender, but none of these can be regarded in determining individual identity. All the characters are in search of their individuality in a war-torn age. Each character is in quest for his or her own identity.

Identity is a postmodern construct: the ways an individual understands what it is to belong to a certain gender, race or culture. Identity is initially constructed by the discourses operating in society, which naturalizes certain ways of knowing what it is to belong to this social group. In *The English Patient* Ondaatje's writing in the 1990's about the second World War questions the very notion of identity, showing how the dominant discourse of Western imperialism and civilization have dispossessed those people of different races and cultural identities.

In Ondaatje's novel identity becomes a textual construct, as its characters perceive themselves not so much through their gender, race or culture, but through their experience. They appear in the narratives that have the form of memories or stories told to others, and are defined by the shifts in their individual time, space, speech, rather than by belonging to a certain social group.

As an expatriate writer, the author brings out transnational identities and cross-cultural meeting across the barriers. Multiculturalism like Indian, British and Canadian is one of the aspects dealt with in the novel. Two Canadians in the villa Hana and Caravaggio, the Greek Almasy and the Indian Kip meet and form a relationship. In the personal recounts of the four occupants of the villa, Ondaatje ingeniously asserts the notion that all people are creatures of the past and tries to define future events accordingly by incorporating a variety of nationalistic themes into the novel. While depicting the last stages of the war, Ondaatje investigates the perception of identity through the transient movement of the characters. All the main four characters of

the novel are in the process of re-evaluating their new identity after the war and are in a retrospective mood. However, the novel revolves around the mystery of the English Patient who seems not to remember his name, and the main narrative of the novel is continuously interrupted by the memories that he is narrating to Hana and other inhabitants of the villa. It is obvious that the identity of the English Patient is the central concern of the novel, and the identities of other characters are revealed through their relation to the burned patient.

One of the essential ideological elements in the pacifist discourse that is put into the mouth of the main protagonist of the novel is the explicit rejection of Nationalism. None of them accepts his condition as a member of a nation as they do not identify themselves with any political entity that could impose feeling of belonging or not belonging on human beings. Therefore, they do not recognize their connection with any 'homeland'. In the case of Michael Ondaatje's novel, these questions constitute one of the main elements that allow us to understand the development of the fourth chapter (South Cario 1930-1938). Through the different passages, we are informed of the loss of national consciousness by the explorers who penetrate deep into the desert during those years. Firstly, it is pointed out that they were men "...of all notions". Then it is said that the national differences were dissolved by their powerful links with the dessert; the desert became their "common homeland". For this reason, Almasy will say, "we are a small clutch of a nation between the wars, mapping and re-exploring" (145). A rejection of the original homeland would be the next step, as Almasy's discourse shows us in the following extract:

"Just the Bedouin and us, crisscrossing the Forty Days Road. There were Rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I have met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, African - all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless, I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-state. Madox died because of notion."(147)

From these premises, the reader has all the elements necessary to understand the real sense of Almasy's later behavior during the war. His collaboration with the German forces does not make him side with one of the groups in conflict but permits him to reach his individual objective (the rescue of Katharine). This is permissible for Almasy as he feels himself nationless and does not see any reason for maintaining loyalty to any state.

The desert could not be claimed or owned-it was 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 treaties 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 faith. We disappeared into landscape. ...Erase the family name. Erase nation! I was taught such things by the desert. (147-8)

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, 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. ...

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.

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. Since Herodotus's history is based on oral records rather than factual, written records, it is being referred to as an inter-text to show the 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 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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