

## Cultural Ambivalence of the Shell-Shocked Characters in *the English Patient*

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### Abstract:

*In the novel The English Patient, the Sri Lankan-born Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje projects his characters as the diasporic subjects performing their ambivalence regarding identity, culture and nationality. This research article, applying diasporic theories as a critical tool, aims to demonstrate the non-conformist cultural and national stand of the shell-shocked characters at the Italian villa of Girolamo as soon as the devastating Second World War has been over. The novelist Ondaatje and his fictional characters bear the fate of diasporic experience entangled between two cultures. Their divided loyalty demonstrates their fractured subjectivity as an outcome in the colonial and postcolonial setting where they come in contact with the people of the nationality and culture which are different from their own. Cultural mixing is a reality in today's world resulting from the transnational and cross-border migration. Such a mix-up phenomenon is not creating a one-way-traffic-like influence from the West to the Rest but it is other way round, too.*

**Key Words:** Diaspora, ambivalence, frontier, post-colonial, globalization, nationality

### Introduction

This research article attempts to read the novel *The English Patient* through the diasporic perspective. Having lived a diasporic life himself, the Sri Lankan-born Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje in the novel posits his shell-shocked characters, from different nations, at the frontier of cultures thereby not firmly claiming any culture and nationality. Their situation of belonging to alien culture to one another keeps them oscillating at the malleable border cultures. Published in 1992, the novel implicitly raises the issues that are pertinent to the postcolonial situation in which the question of identity is one of the most contestable areas in academia and society as well. Although the novel unusually represents the history of the Second World War the reader can't see the war or its propaganda but only the effect of the war on few representative characters living at the desert. Ondaatje himself

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as an Asian diaspora living at the western location and writing his books in their language affirms no cultural prejudice.

In spite of the fact that a number of researches have been made on this novel from various angles of vision like multiple love affairs, trauma of the characters caused by the war, imperialist interest behind the war, the researcher is making an attempt to demonstrate why and how these characters lose their monolithic faith and transgress national and cultural boundaries. Maintaining a pure cultural identity in the postcolonial world of globalization is virtually an impossible enterprise. For the justification of the claim the researcher will borrow concepts from diaspora studies as theoretical underpinning. In the meantime, diasporic approach has also intermittently been used in the case of this novel but mostly the approach looks wholesale and descriptive in nature.

The researcher aims to scrutinize the fluctuating cultural connections of the characters of the novel resulting from their predicament of living in the location of desert where liking and disliking towards themselves and others go on changing. This is a very outcome of the historicity which we are surrounded with. General as well as intellectual readers, through this research, might get oriented to understand the transnational culture as a factual reality of our generation under the gargantuan rubric of globalization. Our national as well as international context bears the predicament of cultural flow throughout the globe. However, the range of flow in all directions does not remain in the same rate due to the power relations between and among the nations and cultures. There lies the significance of this study.

The traumatized shell-shocked characters in the novel, Almasy, Hana, Caravaggio and Kirpal Singh negate their nationalistic determinations without taking an essentialist position in the phenomena such as religion, costume, language and nationality. All of these diasporic characters residing at the frontier of cultures possess both love and hatred to their nations and cultures which they originally belong to. Ambivalence and other relevant theoretical tools existing under diaspora studies will be applied in this study to explore their shell-shocked experience.

### **Theoretical Framework/Research Methodology**

Under the larger purview of diasporic outlook, this study is targeted to explore the ambivalent way of life of the war-torn characters and its reason. Cross-cultural experience, which carries out a situation of hybridity, is an important component of the people of the colonial and postcolonial era. People, who are located at the frontier of cultures, continually go on recreating their identities knowingly or unknowingly. Indeed, culture is by no means a pre-constituted phenomenon. It goes on ever evolving. The persistence on a pure and unified

culture is a ridiculous idea starting from the time of colonization till date. Cultural identity is an acquired phenomenon without any inherent value in the case of diaspora. When the colonizer and the colonized come to the contact, their influence, in terms of culture and way of life, is mutual. Theoretical outlooks will be borrowed from various diaspora theorist and scholar as the methodological tool as per the need to support the proposition. Basically, the vision of critics and scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha, Judith T. Shuval, Ernest Renan, Robert J. Young, Chris Barker, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin will be deployed as the theoretical underpinning for propping up the claim made in this study.

## Results and Findings

The concept of ambivalence highlights cultural mixing and emergence of a different type of being. Culturally ambivalent characters destabilize and blur their cultural boundaries. Cultural and national identities go on forming and reforming over time and across a variety of spaces. Ambivalence emerges out of recognition of differences and produces something different. The bed-ridden English patient, the bomb discharging sapper Kirpal, the shell-shocked Hana and the former thief Caravaggio, all of them blur the national and cultural identities. They possess transnational and trans-cultural identities. From the later phase of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, globalization has increased the range of sources and resources available for identity construction. However, the process of cultural mix-up was initiated from the time, when the trend of colonization began. Population movement and settlement patterns established during the colonial period combined with the more recent phenomena of globalization. Particularly, the proliferation of the electronic communication has skyrocketed the hybrid cultural spaces and mixing.

However, all the four major characters in the novel belong to the setting of the 1940s just after the Second World War ended. They lose their hold on a single culture, single identity and single nationality. Their ambivalent subjectivity seems to be fluid time and again. Nullifying his nationalistic stand, Caravaggio, a Canadian by nationality and a thief by profession, openly criticizes European politics of pledging the war. Kirpal Singh, an Indian Sikh lieutenant, who has specialized in diffusing bombs, follows Euro-American culture as his own but his cultural standpoint is not constant and permanent. He is not content to be affiliated with either culture. The haunting memory of his past life and family members makes him aware of his cultural root. In the meantime, he loves listening to American music. Hana is very much fascinated to the Indian sapper and his dark skin. Her interracial and intercontinental love heightens transcending the boundary of race, geographical space, culture and nationality. Negating his association with any particular nationality, Almsy admits himself as an international bastard. The diasporic characters do not make a

stronghold grip to any culture. At times, they seek the relation to their source culture but not fully committed to it.

## Discussions

Postcolonial literature refers to a huge body of text written by the people of the colonized world especially after independence. It is "... produced by the people of former European colonies" (Barker, 2000:219). The concept of hybridity in culture causes ambivalence. Naturally, the concept of hybridity points to the fact that neither the colonial nor the colonized culture can exist in its pure form. In their accomplished stories and novels, the diasporic writers, who are in exiles in different locations of the West, are recreating the worlds that they have left behind and worlds that they have been living in. Colonialism practiced by the western countries created a situation where the assumption of monolithic culture is disrupted. The concept of hybridity is related to ambivalence that is not a historical concept but a concretely shaped phenomenon by historical factors.

Living at an Italian villa in the desert Almas, Hana, Caravaggio and Kirpal Singh do not hold rigid faith on any culture and nationality. Almas, a Hungarian explorer working for the Allies during the Second World War, is burnt beyond recognition in a plane crash and castigates his nationality. Moreover, he appreciates the verbal beauty that he finds in the indigenous names and words in the desert. Almas opines, "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-states. Madox died because of nations" (Ondaatje, 2001:138).

Hana, a Canadian nurse of twenty years, loves both Almas and Kirpal Singh and shows ambivalent attitude. Her ambivalence seems interesting as occasionally she hugs the image of an Indian goddess and other times, shows her Western imperial superiority through the criticism of Kirpal Singh and Caravaggio especially on their way of eating and walking. The Indian sapper Kirpal Singh's cleft subjectivity is revealed when he wears turban as an Indian cultural symbol and hums American music while disposing bombs. Caravaggio criticizes his nation that taught him to be a thief of information.

Ambivalence is a continual ebb and flow between willing to get one thing and its opposite at the same time. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin say, "Ambivalence describes fluctuating relation between mimicry and mockery" (Ashcroft et al., 1998: 13). An ambivalent subject, at times, claims and other times, disclaims its own cultural practices. The characters transcending their rigid sense of nationality show their liquefied cultural

identity. The parameters for purity of culture get dissolved. Historical factors play an important role in the formation of one's cultural identity. Along with the changes in the historical factors, the extent of attachment and detachment of people to it go on changing.

When people are at diaspora location, that, in other words, is the frontier of cultures, they show culturally confused state of mind. In his book, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, A. Brah writes, "The diaspora space is the site where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native"(qtd. in Barker, 2000:209). In a multicultural location, mingling together of people from various cultural background brings inter-influences between diaspora and natives. Hana loves the Hungarian desert explorer Almasly and the Indian sapper Kirpal Singh irrespective of their nationality. Caravaggio, a former thief has lost not only his thumb but also youth and identity. He faithlessly comments that his nation taught him looting.

At times, canonical Western writers such as Walt Whitman posit themselves at the frontier of cultures and appreciate marginal and aboriginal cultures. But such tendency they perform intermittently is a sign of their cultural ambivalence though it might not sustain for a long time. Whitman writes:

All aboriginal names sound good. I was asking for something savage and luxuriant and behold here are the aboriginal names. I see how they are being preserved. They are honest words - they give the true length, breadth, depth. They all fit. Mississippi- the word wins with chutes - it roles a stream three thousand miles long. Ohio, Connecticut, Ottawa, Monongahela, all fit (qtd. in Simpson, 1994: 185).

Whitman's appreciation of aboriginal names is similar to Almasly's appreciation of indigenous names. The patient says he wants to erase his name and the place he had come from. Nations are not simply political formations but system of cultural representation through which national identity is continually reproduced as discursive action. Despising his nation and identity Almasly comments:

All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was place of faith. We disappeared into landscape. Fire and sand... I did not want my name against such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert...I wanted to erase my name and place I had come from... after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to any one, to any nation (Ondaatje, 2001: 139).

Scarred beyond recognition, Almasly desperately tries to elude the forces of nationality living in the desert where he creates for himself an alternative identity, the one in which family name and nation are irrelevant. He forges his identity through his character, his work

and his interaction with others. Importantly, he chooses this identity rather than inheriting it. Certain environments in the novel lend credence to the idea that national identity can be effaced. The desert and the isolated Italian villa function as such places where national identity is unimportant to one's connection with others. Almasy gives an account of the desert and his opinion on nationality. In the mean time, what is to be noted is nationality is a part within the gargantuan structure of culture.

Abhorring the national boundaries, Almasy remains at the frontier that is the location of connection and disconnection. He hates national and cultural boundaries in order to recreate a wider horizon of humanity. Being a Hungarian-born the English patient Almasy is shocked by the colonialist project of invasion over global humanity. Resultantly, he takes an ambivalent position regarding nationality and culture. The concept of nationality is just a myth for him. His cultural identity is just in the process of formation. His transnational consciousness nullifies the national and racial boundaries. Through the desire of negating his name and nationality, the English patient doesn't like to define himself through colonial discourse that puts the fair-skinned Europeans at the top of the hierarchy regarding the rest of the races inferior. Standing at the frontier of European and indigenous cultures, his cultural identity is fluid. The reiterated phrases such as 'sons and daughters of empire', 'Europeans unfinished' to denote the non-European is colonial discourse formulated to provide legitimacy for ruling over the 'other'.

Locating oneself at the frontier indicates their bearing of a pendulum-like identity. To put it in other words, diasporic writer and characters bear ambivalence in their attitude and outlook whether they claim or not their position at the cultural frontier. The frontier does not merely close the nation in on itself rather immediately opens it to an outside. Frontiers are constitutively crossed or transgressed. Edger Morin clarifies it:

The frontier is both an opening and a closing. It is at the frontier that there takes place the distinction from a liaison with the environment. All frontiers, including the membrane of living beings, including the frontier of nations, are, at the same time as they are barriers, places of communication and exchange. They are the place of dissociation and association, of separation and articulation (qtd. in Bennington, 1994: 121).

A claim can comfortably be made that frontier is the place from where one bears their possibility to make a shift at any direction. Judith T. Shuval opines, "...attitudes of a Diaspora group towards its homeland is often ambivalent-a combination of yearning and distancing" (Suval, 2007: 934). When Hana and Kirpal sleep in the tent, they sometimes recall their past. The narrator reports, "In the tent, there have been nights of no talk and nights full of talk...During the verbal nights, they travel his country of five rivers. The

Sutlej, Jhelum, Ravi, Chenab, Beas. He guides her into the great gurudwara, removing her shoes, washing as she washes her feet, covers her hand" (Ondaatje, 2001: 270-271).

Kirpal, an Indian brown man, works under the white authority and feels himself a stranger to his own land. Through the medium of culture, he is filtered into the hegemonic Western culture. In other words, he has exchanged his own culture for another. At other moment, he comes to realize that the cultural matrix which he longs for is not his own. He might be adopting Western culture as a strategy to fit himself. Wearing a turban as his Indian cultural identity, the young sapper is fond of humming and listening to the American song while dismantling bomb. He feels a kind of affinity with American music that is a cultural symbol of the colonizer. The narrator expresses:

He opened his bag and with scissors clipped the grass away. He laced a small hammock of rope around it and after attaching a rope and pulley to the tree branch slowly lifted the concrete into the air... He pulled the crystal set out of the bag and placed the earphones to his head. Soon the radio as filling him with American music from the AIF station. Two and half minutes' average for each song or dance number. He could work his way back along "A String of Pearls" "C-Jam Blues" and other tunes to discover how long he had been there, receiving the background music subconsciously (Ondaatje, 2001: 98).

The bomb disposer young Sikh Kirpal is culturally divided. The narrator says, "He sleeps half in and half out of the tent" (Ondaatje, 2001: 76). His sleeping position is symbolic to his ambivalent position. The British in their symbolic system produce a kind of subject to the Indian sapper. His identity is transformed from one category to another. Nevertheless, the transformation is not a finished project. Interestingly, his identity swings between the past and the present. He shuttles to and fro between English and Indian culture, unable to find a sense of wholly belonging to either culture.

Robert Young defines hybridity as "a cross-breeding between different human races in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it describes how people became a blend, a mixture of different cultures. There are two types of hybridity: racial and cultural" (Young, 1995:6). To elaborate the concept further, racial hybridity refers to the fusion of races by interbreeding but the cultural hybridity results from the assimilation of two different cultures. Kirpal Singh, the Sikh sapper, has to change his name into 'Kip' as it sounds strange to the English. Such trimness of the name is a manifestation of the colonizer's dominion. The narrator presents a situation in which Kirpal doesn't seem to demonstrate any indignation on his naming by the colonizer. His love and hate relation towards them reads interesting:



They pass numerous bonfires on the sides of the road and Caravaggio diverts the young soldier's attention to them. The sapper's nickname is Kip. "Get Kip." "Here comes Kip." The name had attached itself to him curiously. In his first bomb disposal report in England some butter had marked his paper, and the officer had exclaimed, "What's this? Kipper Grease?" and laughter surrounded him. He had no idea what a 'kipper' was, but the young Sikh had been thereby translated into a salty English fish. Within a week, his real name, Kirpal Singh had been forgotten. He hadn't minded this. Lord Suffolk and his demolition team took to calling him by his nickname, which he preferred to the English habit of calling people by their surname (Ondaatje, 2001: 87/88).

Psychologically bruised all those four characters are culturally in swinging position. Almsy, the main character, is disfigured by burns out of recognition. Hiding his real name, he recalls portions of his story the waydesert oases appear, disappear and reappear. A number of times, he refers to himself in the third person. His exterior is burnt away and any definite sense of identity is gone away. Carrying the book *History of Herodotus* most of the time with him, the bed-ridden patient garners a desire to seek out the stories of the people of the desert as Herodotus didn't simply narrate the story of the victors but wrote about and experienced for himself the cultures of people of the Middle East. Willing to recover the buried history of the desert, Almsy wants to give an exposure to the culture of Bedouins, a nomadic tribe. These examples can be taken as Almsy's attempts to dislocate him from the domineering colonialist culture of the west. Deep-rooted colonialist ego might have been thwarted from his psyche after witnessing the horrible scene of the war and turning out to be a victim of it. His fragmented subjectivity is further revealed through the instance that he sometimes refers to himself in the first person that is quite normal and natural, and other times in the third person that makes his identity contradictory and illusive. A number of times, the reader gets puzzled who he is talking about.

In spite of being an admirer of the efficiency of the English, ultimately, Kirpal Singh gets disillusioned after the atomic bomb is dropped in Japan by the Allies. At that time, he feels more kinship with the Japanese opponents than with the English he works for. He comes to realize that his people have been exploited for their mechanical skill. In an anti-colonial tone, he despises the English colonization of India, "You and then the American converted us. With your missionary rules. And Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be 'pukkah'. You had wars like cricket. How did you fool us into this? Here... listen to what you people have done" (Ondaatje, 2001: 283).

Years later, in his homeland India, he thinks of the time he had spent with Hana, Caravaggio and the English patient. Though he is happy with his wife and children in India, he nostalgically reminisces Hana. His emotional tie with Hana transcends time, geography and



even the great realities of nationality. Being at the frontier of cultures, he swings in between the West and the East. Bearing a contradiction in her identity, the young Canadian nurse, serving the Allies, is another shell-shocked character in the novel. She says to Kirpal, "Kiss me, it's your mouth I'm most purely in love with your teeth" (Ondaatje, 2001: 128). She also "holds and Indian goddess in her arms" (Ondaatje, 2001: 218). Contrary to this stand, other times, she staggers from her stand and looks at the East with paralyzing stereotypes such as 'lazy'. The novelist accounts her vision, "She imagines all of Asia through the gestures of this one man. The way he lazily moves, his quiet civilization" (Ondaatje, 2001: 217).

Further evidence for the claim can be presented by demonstrating Hana's certain sense of European superiority. The narrator, on behalf of the nurse, projects Caravaggio as an immature and uncivilized in order to denounce the people of the Eastern world, "He sits with his hands below the table, watching the girl eat. He still prefers to eat alone, though he always sits with Hana during meals...she has seen him from a window eating with his hands as he sits on one of the thirty-six steps by the chapel, not a fork or a knife in sight, as if he were learning to eat like someone from the East" (Ondaatje, 2001: 39-40).

She denounces Caravaggio as a barbarian who doesn't know even the way of eating. At this particular point, she is showing her imperial burden to civilize the colonized subject. She loves Almasy and Kirpal at different times. Her cleft subjectivity, on one hand, does not want to leave the villa, on the other hand, she says, "I wanted to go home and there was no one at home. And I was sick of Europe" (Ondaatje, 2001: 85). These statements show her ambivalent attitude longing for both sides. At times, she hugs the image of an Indian goddess and other times, sees her English patient as a 'despairing saint' and "hipbones like Christ" (Ondaatje, 2001: 3). She is entangled at the frontier of cultures. Love and hatred, both phenomena, operate on her part regarding her relation with people, nationality and culture.

Caravaggio has no pride of European origin. He is exhausted by personal or professional robberies. During the Second World War, he was employed by the Allies to collect risky information and important maps from the German. He was accidentally caught and his hands were nearly chopped off. When the war is over, he comes to realize the futility of war, "The trouble with all of us is we are where should not be. What are we doing in Africa, in Italy? What is Kip doing dismantling bombs in orchards, for God's sake? What is he doing fighting English wars?" (Ondaatje, 2001: 122). He faithlessly castigates the Western aggression. His distrust upon his nationality and more than that his distrust upon the war-loving Western tendency posits himself at the frontier of cultures. He crosses the boundary

of his nationality and, many times, speaks the voice of the marginal world keeping him at the ambivalent location.

Without associating himself with a particular nationality, Almasy admits, "Kip and I are both international bastards-born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere" (Ondaatje, 2001: 176). This statement demonstrates Almasy's cultural ambivalence. Similarly, when Kirpal hears on the radio of the atomic bomb that the United States dropped on Japan, he becomes enraged. His faith on the colonial master and their cultural properties like music gets dissolved. He concludes that a Western country would never commit such an atrocity against another white country. He takes the gun and threatens to kill the English patient whom he sees as a symbol of the West. Eventually, he generalizes all Europeans and Americans as Englishmen, "American, French I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you are an Englishman. You had king Leopald of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English" (Ondaatje, 2001: 286).

These Ondaatjean characters undermine nation as "The nations are not something eternal. They had their beginnings and they will end" (Renon, 1994: 20). In the similar fashion, the British cultural historian Raymond Williams says, "...the modern nation state is entirely artificial" (qtd. in Brennan, 1994: 45). At this time, when national borders are weakened by the cross flows of people, money, technology and idea, cross-cultural experience, which carries out a situation of hybridity, is an important component. People and fictional characters at the cultural frontiers live a life of divided selves that is ambivalence in other words. Many migrant writers from the Third World to the First World engage at the cultural frontier as Trisanku, a mythical figure in Indian epic Ramayana. Trisanku in the myth gets entangled in between the heaven and the earth. Those writers have been adopting the notion of diasporic identity as a positive affirmation to their cleft identity. At this juncture, they do not take an essentialist position regarding culture and nationality. Michael Ondaatje also follows the same line of writing. His characters in the novel *The English Patient* are the rootless citizens of the world displaced from their origin. Identity, in his case, resembling to his characters, is a dynamic process developed out of historicity. Hence, it is a fluid phenomenon instead of static.

In an interview published in *The New York Times*, Ondaatje confesses his hybrid identity, "I would say, I was someone living in a new country and all that, and I would see myself as the outsider" (Ondaatje, Oct.1994: 5). In the same interview he further says, "The best art is always mongrel" (Ondaatje, Oct.1994: 5). The moment we analyze both of these statements made by Ondaatje, we can conclude that he bears a hybrid identity with an ambivalent

attitude. The characters in the novel look like his alter ego bearing fractured identity and ambivalent self.

## Conclusions

As the surrogate images of the diasporic novelist Ondaatje, his characters in the novel *The English Patient* demonstrate the diasporic fate of cultural ambivalence oscillating between love and hatred to their motherland culture. Almasi, Hana, Caravaggio and Kirpal Singh posit themselves at the cultural frontier and perform indecisive identity that is the natural outcome of the historicity they are surrounded with. Their stand on nationality and culture keeps on oscillating as they are brought to an alien land by the process of colonization. In the novel, imperialwar is the historical factor that has congregated the shell-shocked characters in the villa. They negate their nationalistic and cultural bias and resultantly cross the frontiers thereby growing into ambivalent selves.

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