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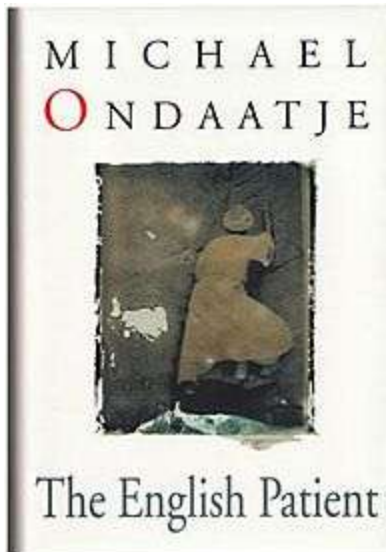
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**Making Life Livable in Adverse Conditions: A Study of Michael Ondaatje's  
*The English Patient***

**Pauline Das, Ph.D.**

**Mary Christina, Ph.D. Scholar**



## **Introduction**

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In 1971, Canada became the first country in the world to declare multiculturalism as official state policy. The bold step charted the path to a vibrant and evolving cultural mosaic premised on mutual respect for Canadians of all backgrounds and ancestry. Today, multiculturalism is a touchstone of Canadian national identity and a point of pride for the Canadians. Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* recalls how people of different nations come together in adverse conditions by negating their individual identity and embracing a oneness of mind and spreading love that would make their lives livable.

### **Death versus Rebirth**

The novel is set in the turbulent times of the World War. The atomic bomb in Ondaatje's *The English Patient* symbolizes the western aggression and reawakens the characters to reality. On the other hand the Italian villa symbolizes the spiritual death and rebirth of the inhabitants. Even though war destroyed the villa, nature replaced the void with new life. This mirrors the way the characters learn to live again after the emotional destruction of war. The symbolism of the patch-work quilt and the Italian villa, talks about the art of survival amidst crisis.

### **The Power of Love**

Love being one of the major themes in *The English Patient* shows the different cultures of people of different countries who have come to mutual understanding in an Italian villa during the World War II. Each one has his / her experience from war and the love that emerges is one of mutual needs and the search for fulfillment of those needs during the stress of wartime.

### **Desert as a Setting**

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As a setting for a love story, the desert is an empty and barren place, which helps us to focus on the intensity of personal connections that take place there. At once harsh and beautiful, the desert acts as an intensifier, heightening the drama and the tragedy in human relationships (Marie, 5). Here the tragedy is mainly associated with their cultural differences with a quest for identity.

### **The Impact of War**

All the major characters that have been introduced have been entirely altered by the war. Caravaggio, a former thief, has lost not only his thumbs, but also much of his youth and his identity. He can no longer steal, nor can he live any kind of happy life. He finds himself envious of those “whole” men he sees, men who can live independently and without pity. The English patient has likewise been visibly transformed by the war. Having literally lost his entire identity, he is alive only to reflect on the life he once had. Hana, too, has been irrevocably altered by her wartime experience. After having a near break-down, Hana stands on the cusp of adulthood, unsure whether to take charge of her life or to hide and look for shelter like a child (The English Patient). She chooses to postpone her decision, remaining in a villa and caring for a burned man. The war has taken a piece of each character’s identity, replacing it with a scar that each now bears.

### **Love Transcends Culture and Identity**

Love, if it is truly heartfelt, transcends place and time. Hana feels love and connection to her father even though he has died alone, far from her in another theatre of war. Almsy desperately maintains his love for Katherine even though he is unable to see her or reach her in the cave.

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Likewise, Kip, despite leaving Italy to marry in India, never loses his connection to Hana, whom he imagines thirteen years later and halfway across the globe. Such love transcends even death, as the characters hold onto their emotions even past the grave but definitely has its impact from cultural differences. This idea implies a larger message- that time and place themselves are irrelevant to human connection but culture and identity intervenes to change lives (Marie,2). We see this especially in Almásy's connection to Herodotus 'The Histories', whose writings he follows across time through the desert. Maps and geography become details, mere artificial lines that man imposes on the landscape. It is only the truth in the soul, which transcends time that matters in the novel.

### **Suffering Teaches Mercy**

War can change people's life. It has a definite impact on you. But when you have lived through it there are so many valuable lessons learnt. Suffering talks about mercy, when you suffer even the smallest kindness shown by someone touches you. You learn the value of mercy. Love is the embodiment of mercy, kindness and patience. When you have experienced that even for a short time you learn of its impact: How it has the power to change a man. Love is a powerful thing when you use it in the positive manner, it can help you to change your life for the better, in the negative way it destroys everything in its path, it consumes.

### **The Possibility of Multiple Realities Existing Simultaneously**

The Herodotus book highlights the possibility of multiple realities existing simultaneously. The geographical and cultural descriptions Almásy records in the book belie the existence of his Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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affair and obsession with Katharine (Marie, 8). Writing over the words of Herodotus, Almásy is literally rewriting history, choosing his perception of reality over that of his historian predecessor. By connecting them to the present moment, relating them to their own lives, they change the history, introducing a new dimension into it, thereby giving a new identity.

### **Consuming of Oneself and the Past**

As the English Patient writes in his book,

A love story is not about those who lose their heart but about those who find that sullen inhabitant who, when it is stumbled upon, means the body can fool no one, can fool nothing- not the wisdom of sleep or the habit of social graces. It is a consuming of oneself and the past. (Ondaatje, 104).

### **Culture Differences**

The major characters are analysed based on their cultural differences made evident in their love relationship and how incidents are interpreted differently based on their culture. Kip is an Indian Sikh who works as a British sapper. Much of Kip's goodwill toward the English emerges from his experience with Lord Suffolk and his staff. Suffolk is astute enough to recognize Kip's skill and character, and thus not only trains him in bomb defusing, but also welcomes him into the family, even taking him to see *Peter Pan* when he wanted to (The English Patient). Kip is touched by the fact that this true English gentleman would look past his race and take him under his wing. It becomes evident that Kip feels closer to his English family than to his Indian one.

Though he talks sadly about his mentor Lord Suffolk and his premature demise, he seems Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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relatively nonchalant about the fate of his Indian family. When Hana asks if Kip's father is still alive, he replies as if it is not much concern to him: "Oh, yes. I think. I've not had letters for some time. And it is likely that my brother is still in jail."(Ondaatje, 120)

### **Adopting other Customs and Losing One's Identity**

As a soldier who has had a difficult life both at war and at home, Kip is a conflicted and complicated character. Ondaatje takes free license with Kip, employing him as a lens through which to explore Anglo-Indian relations during a period of chaos for the British Empire. Kip's experiences in India with his brother who harbours deep resentment toward the West and with fellow soldiers in England who react with reserve to his brown skin highlight the strained and skeptical relations between two parts of one large Empire (*The English Patient*). As an Indian man serving in the British army, Kip straddles two worlds, walking a fine line between adopting Western customs and losing his national identity.

### **Events and Realities are not Isolated**

However, the news of the atomic bomb brings the reality of the outside world back into to the sheltered environment of the Italian villa. When Kip hears about the United States' bombing of Hiroshima, he screams, falling to his knees. His pain comes not only from the shattered lives of the Japanese people, but from the shattering of his own ideals. Despite his older brother's anti-western warnings, Kip has put his faith in the west, adjusting to its culture and doing all he can to save it from destruction. He denies, in his own mind, that the west could be as oppressive to Asia as his brother claims. The explosion of the atomic bomb symbolizes the destruction of Kip's

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entire belief system. The bomb's intrusion on their villa existence highlights the fact that events and realities are not isolated. What happens in Japan touches the very heart of emotions in a small villa in the hills of Italy. Kip responds to the news of the bomb by running away, escaping his life in the villa. He views his running away as a flight from the oppression of the west. Ultimately, however, Hana's suspicion that Kip can so easily move on is confirmed, as he finds himself tied to the life he once led. Kip's emotional tie to Hana transcends time and geography, and transcends even the great realities of nationality(Marie,2).

### **National Identity**

Kip in *The English Patient* is not welcomed amidst his colleagues due to his brown skin. There is division in the name of regional demarcations. Ultimately, however, the characters cannot escape from the outside reality that, in wartime, national identity is prized above all else. This reality invades Almásy's life in the desert and Kip's life in the Italian villa. Desperate for help, Almásy is locked up merely because his name sounds foreign. His identity follows him even after he is burned beyond recognition, as Caravaggio realizes that the "English" patient is not even English(Marie,3). For Kip, news of the atomic bomb reminds him that, outside the isolated world of the villa, western aggression still exists, crushing Asian people as Kip's brother had warned. National identity is, then, an inescapable part of each of the characters, a larger force over which they have no control.

### **Kip's Characterization**

Far from being perfect at his profession, Hana remembers him being

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constantly diverted by the human element during burglaries. ...Breaking into a house during Christmas, he would become annoyed if he noticed the Advent calendar had not been opened up to the date to which it should have been (*The English Patient*).

Such diversion signals fallibility in Caravaggio, and his remarkably human actions give us the sense that even though he is a thief, he may not necessarily be immoral. In contrast, Kip's profession in the army is a noble one. He saves innocent lives every day by defusing bombs, a duty that neutralizes aggression. As a character, however, Kip is not gripped by the same humanizing diversions that occupy Caravaggio. While he is working on a bomb he completely puts aside the human element of his work. He does not give a thought to his feelings or emotions, but only to the task at hand. He repeatedly thinks that he needs either Hardy or Hana to "bring him back to humanity"(Ondaatje, 119).

### **The Nature of Humanity during Wartime**

This contrast between Kip and Caravaggio emphasizes the nature of humanity in wartime. As the characters find it is so necessary to protect them emotionally, they find it easy to sacrifice humanity (*The English Patient*). Kip sections off his humanity, seemingly saving it until the war by placing a wall between himself and everyone else. *The English Patient* also does this throughout the 1930s, refusing to let anyone get close to him in his travels, his affairs, and his friendships. He shares little about his private life, choosing to stick to only the descriptive facts when he writes about the landscape and the geography. This detachment is what makes Katherine's entrance into his life so disruptive to him. She forces humanity and fallibility into his

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life. In the end, Ondaatje offers no judgment on the characters varying approaches to the question of humanity, as both Kip and Almasy are left with only the consequences of their decisions.

### **Being Nationless**

Kip's experience highlights the fallacy of being "nationless." Though he is born of a different nation-albeit part of the British empire-Kip finds a nation to which he attaches himself both in nature and in action. Such an understanding of Kip's connection to a nation sheds light on the English patient's connection to his own nation, as the patient himself invites this comparison. The patient has left his European home and joined the nation that is the desert. There, like Kip, he has found his skills were most useful, and feels able to erase his past so that he may be known and valued for what he has to offer the people of his new nation, the desert. Escaping one's nation, then, becomes a larger metaphor for escaping one's past, and creating a new identity: one that is based on personal character (Marie,3).

### **Gaining Identity**

The protagonist and the "English patient" of the novel's title, Almásy exists as the center and focus of the action, despite the fact that he is without name or identity for much of the novel. Almásy thus serves as the blank sheet upon whom all the other characters focus their desires and expectations. Little by little, he reveals his identity, and finally his name, in Chapter IX. When Almásy's name is revealed we discover the great irony of the novel: the English patient is not even English, but rather Hungarian by birth, an "international bastard" who has spent much of

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his adult life wandering the desert(*The English Patient*). In this way, the English patient serves to highlight the great difference between imagination and reality, and the abstraction of concepts such as nationality and citizenship. On the whole, Almásy is not at all what the other characters think he appears to be.

### **Casting away National Identity**

Though Almásy is not a highly dynamic character-by the year in which the story is set, all the events of his life have passed, he is arguably the most intriguing and mysterious figure. He is portrayed in a sympathetic light, but we must keep in mind that this may be because we hear his story from his own point of view. From an objective perspective, many of his actions, lies, and betrayals appear reprehensible(*The English Patient*). Nonetheless, Almásy escapes total condemnation because of his knowledge, charm, and adherence to his own system of values. To Almásy who places no value in the concept of nations and states it is not at all unethical to help a German spy through the desert. Indeed, Almásy concludes that national identity is completely irrelevant in the desert. Ultimately, however, he suffers greatly for his beliefs and for his moments of passion. Almásy's enduring spirit and his firm connection between past and present are what keep him, the English patient, foremost in our minds

Nationality and identity are interconnected in *The English Patient*, functioning together to create a web of inescapable structures that tie the characters to certain places and times despite their best efforts to evade such confinement. Almásy desperately tries to elude the force of nationality, living in the desert where he creates for himself an alternate identity, one in which family and

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nation are irrelevant. Almásy forges this identity through his character, his work, and his interactions 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 erased (Marie, 3). The desert and the isolated Italian villa function as such places where national identity is unimportant to one's connection with others. Kip, who becomes enmeshed in the idea of Western society and the welcoming community of the villa's inhabitants, even dismisses his hyperawareness of his own racial identity for a time.

### **Multiculturalism – the Identity of Canada**

*The English Patient* suits to represent Canada's culture as the Italian villa becomes a symbol of Canada as a whole. It is a place where immigrants from different parts of the world unite together under one roof. In the novel the cause for this unification was World War II, the most adverse condition from which they made their lives livable by erasing their individual identity and separate nationality and opting for togetherness.

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