

**Decoding the notion of Nationalism: A Critical Study of
Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient***

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Abstract

Michael Ondaatje's most acclaimed fictional work *The English Patient* (1992) is characterized by intertwined issues like identity, masculinity and, femininity, and some political implications as well. This paper seeks to illustrate how this work of fiction through its many aspects manifests and promotes a deconstructionist view of nationhood thereby giving us a sense that nations are being increasingly viewed as volatile structures. There are various theories on nationalism, and they can be grouped into two types: those emphasizing the positive influence of nationalism, and those focusing on the destructive force contained in nationalism. The notion "nationalism" itself is a double-edged sword: colonizing, injustice, and anti-colonizing, justice - both can be under its name. It is what it is used for that exactly gives nationalism a positive or negative connotation. Then what is nationalism like in *The English Patient*? Is Ondaatje for or against this nationalism? Can this kind of nationalism, in his opinion, be transcended? What is the significance of this transcendence? Through a detailed analysis of the novel mainly from the perspectives of the protagonist's profession as a cartographer, the transnational community established in the villa, and the discussion on the seemingly abrupt ending, I come to conclusion that nationalism in this novel is indeed a narrow nationalism, or the negative aspect of nationalism. By associating it with war, trauma and great damage, Ondaatje severely criticizes and condemns the practice of such a narrow nationalism. That's why, he, as an optimistic writer, still depicts an inseverable relationship between the characters of the villa, which definitely reveals his yearning for and belief in its transcendence. Actually, transcending nationalism, in its real sense, should first and foremost respect rather than efface different nationalities. It may well

be said, to some extent, that the more national a discourse is, the more likely that transcendence can be.

Keywords: Michel Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, Nationalism, Transcendence, Nation, National identity.

Nationalism and Literature

Nationalism is a complex phenomenon as it encompasses and makes sense of all the different situations in which it is used. It is an ideology, in general, in which nationality is used as a parameter by humans to define themselves. It necessarily classifies humans – “one either is or is not a member of ‘my nation’”. It basically uses markers or indicators such as language, religion, territory, ethnicity, culture, history, political-cultural institutions to thrive and the idea that there is a national identity or character. Nationalism has become a major concern of contemporary world literature. Literature, as a mode of communication or vehicle, helps to express nationalistic ideas particularly well. It gives voice to the nations or nationalist movements which are indeed identifiable entities moving in time. William Butler Yeats’s poetry, for instance, tries to invoke old Ireland in order to create for the modern country a pre-colonial image to which it might aspire. Similarly, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) is a critique of nationalist movements, portraying them as dehumanizing groups that stress unity over humanity. The Indian nationalist movement and the Indo-Pakistani war both in the novel come very close to destroying the future of India, all for the advancement of the idea of a strong, homogenous, modern nation.

Nationalistic Orientation of Michael Ondaatje

Michael Ondaatje’s most acclaimed fictional work *The English Patient* (1992), having been voted readers’ favorite in 50 years, translated into 38 languages, and the film scooped nine Oscars, presents a fine case for the study on nationalism. The basic aim of this paper is to illustrate how this work of fiction through its many aspects, manifests and promotes a deconstructionist view of nationhood thereby giving us a sense that nations are being increasingly viewed as volatile structures.

The text derives its nationalistic impetus from the author’s personal background. Michael Ondaatje was born in what was then Ceylon region of Sri Lanka when it was under the British rule. He is of Dutch-Tamil-Sinhalese descent. His parents, tea planters, separated when he was about seven, when his mother moved to England. Born in Sri Lanka, educated in England, and settling down in Canada, he is deprived of a sense of belonging, because he never truly feels integrated into these countries. “His sensibility, therefore, is most ideally suited to depicting the antinational and transnational stance without any unilateralist predilections” (Vijayalayan and Claramma 674).

The English Patient

Michael Ondaatje's most acclaimed fictional work *The English Patient* (1992) depicts "four people inhabiting the mined rooms of a remote Italian villa at the end of the Second World War; four very different people who meet in damaged solitude, who talk (there are a lot of night conversations), who love, whose histories, revealed in vivid flashes, become a taut, outraged meditation on the idea of war, of nationalism and of prejudice; a meditation that slips between spies and explorers, Suffolk and the Egyptian desert; ..." (Edemariam). The plot is set against the overwhelming backdrop of ruin and violence. The characters start inhabiting in a villa where they engage in a process of physical and emotional healing by establishing an imperishable bond of love and harmony. Their kinship or relationship is special in the sense that they come from different nationalities and belong to enemy camps. If the death and destruction represent mindless violence and massacre wrought in the name of nation and nationality, then, their bond embodies transnational phenomenon that completely denounces nationalism or nationalist prejudices. This very incident somewhere signals for a progressive way of moving into a better future and acts as an antidote to the warmongers. The author employs a number of powerful images and symbols to dismiss the nationalist prejudices exhibited in the relationship of the characters.

Important characters in the novel are the ones who suffer identity crisis and displacement perpetuated by the colonizer and colonized. Identity being a social construct where the self and the other are the two central issues. The sense of belonging to a different ethnicity or nations are based on the concept of identity.

Bewildering Character of the English Patient

The English patient remains an indecipherable personality throughout the text. His perplexing persona comes into being from his first appearance in the novel when we find him in a completely disfigured state. His body was burnt beyond recognition owing to a plane crash. He is "A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire...There was nothing to recognize in him" (*The English Patient* 50).

The charred image of the patient forms the core symbol of the text. The disfigured body of the patient becomes a blank canvas for absorbing many identities. His multifaceted persona is identified during the course of the novel as a cartographer, lover, desert explorer, spy etc. Ironically, his true identity never comes to the picture.

An Embodiment of Fleeting and Fluid Identities

Ondaatje's English patient is an embodiment of fleeting and fluid identities. By doing so he tries to deconstruct the popular notion of nation and nationalism. Many incidents of his past life, the patient delineations are bewildering and self-contradictory. But his hatred for nations

remains unanswered. “I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states” (*The English Patient* 147) for the patient nations encourage strong feelings of enmity and hatred for other nations. They curtail individual freedom and put constraints of rooted affiliation and ideology. The patient dislikes the tendency to belong to any particular institution. What do you like the most? He asks. “A lie. And you” “Ownership”, he says” (*The English Patient* 162)

Meaning of Life

For the patient the true meaning of life consists in “transcending the demands of external relations. By subjecting oneself to the claims of extrinsic forces, the individual robs life of its intrinsic value” (Vijayalayan and Claramma 675). The existence of nations are the greatest threat to the patient. Hence, they should be wiped out of the map. His own life is in a constant movement is a reaction against the idea of belonging or fixity that nations stand for. The patient celebrates his freedom in being rootless and the freedom of disowning national ties by proclaiming himself to be an “international bastard” (*The English Patient* 267). “The patient’s disfigured image becomes a “black hole” (Spinks 177) in which the demarcation of nations dissolves into essentially fluid formations” (Vijayalayan and Claramma 676).

The Desert Image

As we can see, in the novel the desert has been used a metaphor which did represent the notion of transience. The patient’s affinity with the desert is not merely because of being a desert explorer seeking the location of a lost oasis. Their connection is at the level of metaphor. The patient’s disfigured body steadily resists being decoded in precise terms, like the shimmering surface of the desert remains immune to all modes of inscription. The attributes of the desert are to refuse anything artificial such as borders or names as a landscape because through sand storms those borders or marks or names of a landscape will be changed continuously. The desert by its virtue transcends all efforts of acquisition like the way the patient’s expressionless face outdo fixed identities. “The desert could not be claimed or owned. It was a piece of cloth carried by winds, ... (*The English Patient* 147). If the patient is “pure carbon” (TEP 115), the desert represents a “pure zone” (TEP 261), both lie outside the range of any physical or ideological appropriation. In fact, it is the desert that instills antinationalization fervor in the patient. “Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert” (*The English Patient* 148). The patient develops an ardent hatred for nations because he considers the desert as an ideal space of dwelling free from borders. Nations, for him, represent the repudiation of those features and virtues that make the desert utopian. Nations are vigorously controlled social construct, which function in keeping with the logic of formal acquisition and administration. They are also characterized by a certain sense of ownership. His dislike for nations comes from the fact that it claims some kind of ownership. The patient criticizes nationalism which has created artificial borders through mapping and also the money and power involved in the process. He wants to

erase national identities constructed by nationalism which is responsible for erecting imaginary borders that lead to the separation among the people of nations.

The Contrast between Desert and Nations

As far as the contrast between desert and nations at the conceptual level is concerned, it is worthy to point out that the golden period of desert expedition comes to an end with the outbreak of the Second World War. War is a manifestation of the catastrophic element which is an integral part of the framework of the nation. Contrary, the desert experience ushers friendly relations which the war negates to accommodate. His recollection talk is full of his desert experience which he seems to be obsessed with. War with its nationalist resounding means less to the patient when compared to the liminal experience he had with desert. The desert is thus, projected as a model for fashioning human experience. The desert is a space of the expedition work, which brings together researchers from different nations. Eventually, it compels these members to repel their national identities and merge themselves into one within its vast borderless canvas. “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. Fire and sand” (*The English Patient* 148). Besides, desert is the space where the patient is engaged in a romantic relationship with Katharine; both of them are of different nationalities. Thus, the desert appears to be a space of transnational convergence, a place with blurry boundaries where relationships are divested of parochial national interests.

The Dilapidated Villa

A parallel can be drawn between the desert and the villa in the novel as it carries multiple transnational significance. The war has reduced the villa into an image of decay and despair. “The limbs of most of the statues were blown off during the first days of shelling. There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, the damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth” (*The English Patient* 45). The villa is located within a short distance of Florence with full of renaissance art, and crumbling down of the place is “a grim reminder of the fragility of European cultural humanism in the face of political barbarism” (Spinks 173). It also symbolizes a complete annihilation of the idea of wholeness. “The overwhelming antinationalist resonance of the text naturally means that this annihilation fundamentally comes down to an undermining of the popular holistic notions of the nation-state” (Vijayalayan and Claramma 678). In this regard, the character of San Girolamo becomes an incarnation of the concept of nation as a volatile entity. “They were protected by the simple fact that the villa seemed a ruin. But she felt safe here” (TEP 15). Its ruined feature makes it a utopian one thereby making it a safe haven for the inhabitants from the insanities happening outside.

The villa, very much in tune with the patient's portrayal, also represents the idea of passing identities. From being a nunnery to a lodging camp for German soldiers, later it is converted into a hospital by the allied forces. Every new occupant inflicted substantial damage on the villa's architecture. The villa is left ruined or robbed of its old heritage through a turbulent progression of history. "Crucially, it is this tumultuous past that imparts to the villa's persona its essential make-shift feature in the novel's present" (Vijayalayan and Claramma 678).

The villa also represents a succinct metaphor of the idea on emancipation. The recreational activity that Hana engages herself involving a rectangular box draws out a pyramid structure. This hopping of the rectangular box from one formally enclosed space into another has a deep metaphorical implication in the novel. Seen in the light of mapping, a recurrent motif of pyramid assumes a cartographic shape thereby symbolizing the neat assemblage of nations as it represents on a map. The hopping across the boxes therefore signifies a blatant and deliberate violation of the idea of boundaries separating nations.

Portrayal of Love

Portrayal of love among the characters is integrally linked with many of the work's concern. *The English Patient* reinforces the fact that it is through love, a selfless and united form of affection for fellow human beings, that national barriers can truly be breached and affinities among nations solidified. The healing power of love is palpable in the text. Hannah risks her life and stays back in the villa to look after the patient, principally because she loves him. Caravaggio arrives in the villa seeking Hannah and decides to stay, chiefly because he loves her. The patient puts his life in jeopardy in going back to the cave to salvage Catherine's body, though she's laid there dead for many years, because of his sincere love for her. In all these manifestations of love there is absolutely no prospect of any form of gain involved. The act of kindness shown by the characters is purely done out of selfless love for each other. It is this altruistic feature that enables each of the characters to transcend the formal constraints enforced on them by the world at large. Ultimately, all forms of temporal and spatial demarcation dissolve into oblivion in the wake of the characters' love for each other. This very bond ceases to exist when news of atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki breaks out.

Enduring Ties

The eternal bond between Hana and Kip is a testimony of their enduring ties that they forged while staying together at the Villa. Villa is a space where their relationship takes a deep root which one cannot ignore. The sustained linkages between them across continents have a transnational bearing as the two nations merge with one another. Through this relationship Ondaatje is able to conflate the idea of nation-state.

“And so Hana moves and her face turns and in regret she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal’s left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles” (*The English Patient* 321).

Kip and Hana become a whole only when synchronized. The creation and sustenance of linkages across nation-states will be possible and effective only by an integration forged on the lines of spatial, cultural and temporal hybridity.

Conclusion

The words of Almasy seems to echo the voice of Ondaatje when the former says, “All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps.” (*The English Patient* 174). Ondaatje here seems to suggest for a world which can be achieved through harmony and peace but not with war, at least. A re-imposition of the nationalisms dissolved through the rest of the novel, where, as Kamila Shamsie put it: “Ondaatje’s imagination acknowledges no borders as it moves between Cairo, Italy, India, England, Canada – and between deserts and villas and bomb craters” (Roy). Ondaatje severely criticizes and condemns the practice of a narrow nationalism. That’s why, he, as an optimistic writer, still depicts an inseverable relationship between the characters of the villa, which definitely reveals his yearning for and belief in its transcendence. Actually, transcending nationalism, in its real sense, should first and foremost respect rather than efface different nationalities.

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