



Postcolonial Hybridity in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

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Abstract: Cross-cultural interactions have been an important topic in the field of postcolonial literature and theory. The work of Canadian-based writer and poet Michael Ondaatje is noted for the nuanced mapping of post-colonial hybrid cultural experience. Cultural hybridity, identity and otherness entangled together form a new entity. The work of Sri Lankan origin Ondaatje is a complex thematic link between these issues; In fact, they can be seen as central concerns in his work. The composite experience that Ondaatje writes about is inconsistent, and involves internal contradictions. The postcolonial literary themes challenge the binary understanding that the colonized people are naïve, and degraded. This paper will focus on cultural hybridity, and it certainly will point out the central themes in the *English Patient*.

Keywords: Postcolonial literature, Michael Ondaatje, Contradictions, English Patient

I. THE ENGLISH PATIENT

The colonized countries due to their intense cultural amalgamation seem to produce a literature which is hybrid in nature. In fact cross cultural themes have become a significant theme when one considers the postcolonial literature. The works of Michael Ondaatje can be safely called postcolonial works. The themes like cultural hybridity, and identity are interwoven in his novels. It is complex at times as it links lot of thematic issues. The hybridity however is not simple, it is contradictory at time. In this paper, the postcolonial hybridity in *The English Patient* is discussed.

The story is about a badly burnt man but who has an eerie personality. The narration is not linear, it jumps between the past and the present. Sometimes the story feels like a mystery and in other times it feels like philosophic. The setting is a ruined Italian villa right after the Second World War. The important characters include Hana who has volunteered herself to care for the hurt soldiers and others. There is also an Indian sapper called Kirpal Singh, who is nicknamed as Kip. He defuses bombs in the mines and the surrounding area of the villa, which are not safe. The past life of the English patient is the crux of the novel. As the story progresses one comes to understand his name is Almásy, who is a Hungarian Count. The injury is due to his love affair with Katharine Clifton. She was the wife of the young British explorer of the Geographical Society.

The postcolonial aspect is quite certain in the novel. The fragmentary writing

is a trademark style of Ondaatje. The postcolonial theory has dealt with issues such a culture, society, ethnicity and racialism. It gives voice to those who are marginalized by the western hegemony. Some of the critical theorists like Homi Bhabha and Edward Said have laid the proper foundation for postcolonial theory. The postcolonial literary themes challenge the binary understanding that the colonized people are naïve, and degraded. This paper will focus on cultural hybridity, and it certainly will point out the central themes in the *English Patient*.

The viewpoints in Homi Bhabha's cultural hybridity is to show that cultural hybridity cause tension. It is a mixture of race, religion and rationality. It is the third space. In Ondaatje's work there is a cultural hybridity, and when cultural hybridity happens the characters involved will not have a unique culture. Their cultures will be hybrid, and their identity too is changed from a unique one to a hybrid culture. The main characters in the novel all have multiple cultural identities. They do not even have a good national affiliation. The *English Patient* is a Hungarian expatriate who has turned into the citizen of the world. The characters experience how their culture has become mixed in the modern world. They can feel the interconnectedness and mixedness of various cultural influences.

Homi Bhabha states about the cultural hybridity and the challenges: Hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal. Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration. It makes possible the emergence of an „interstitial“ agency that refuses the binary representation. (Bhabha 34).

The complete binary representation is negated when it comes to cultural hybridity. The character of the English patient is quite strange. Nobody knows who he is as a person. His past is a mystery to many people. The secrets and memories of his past certainly is the crux of the story. The narration of Almasy is unreliable as in the beginning he cannot actually remember his name nor his nationality. To mask his identity he adds more to his story like the English garden. Almasy always seem to be with the book „The Histories“ by Herodotus. He keeps writing his own observation in the book, and critics have pointed out that he is writing himself into the old text. They are saying that Almasy is rewriting his identity, similarly to the way he adding to his own identity. The identity seems to be maturing as the narration progresses. As per the critic Hall“s formulation that cultural identity is a process which is constructed continuously.

The central characters as already mentioned are not defined by the national or in fact not even by their cultural origin. The characters are all doubly displaced. For instance the Canadian Caravaggio speaks fluent Italian in the fascist Italy, and similarly Almasy hides his nationality by his perfect command of his English language. They are spies who without doubt construct their own identities. Almasy has guided the Germans in the desert, and Caravaggio has acted like a double agent by feeding false rumors.

These characters have somehow managed to act in the way that they almost live with another identity. The construction of the identity can be an abrupt process. The hybridization seems to be done in a way that alters the characters. The actions of the characters modify them and for instance right after Kip hears about the Atomic bomb he renounces his western affiliation and he leaves the villa. Similarly, Almasy who is a person of few words now seems to be the constant narrator of incidents like the loss of Kathrine Clifton and how he did not go back to the Cave to save her and also his plane crash when he returns to the Cave to get her body. These are the intense movements in which an altercation occurs. These are the intense times in which cultural hybridization takes place. As these characters face these instance movements they strongly connect with a culture that nurtures them at that moment.

The dislocation also is a major reason for the cultural hybridity. Right after the Second World War they are displaced. They are displaced in a physical way and also in the mental way. The cultural and national borders all disappear when the character tend to act in different cultures. In fact they are not certain about their own identity. Their dislocation and the place of the dislocation is the closest understanding they have of their culture. Before the crash Almasy was an independent man, who was with the European elite for quite some period. But only after the crash he is helpless, and an invalid. This change too could have played a major role in changing his culture or rather to come into cultural hybridity. He is stripped off all his European powers, and because of the crash his skin too is dark. Now his identity is questioned.

Critics have seen this as a criticism of Western racial stereotypes. This is also seen as a challenge to the concepts like nation, identity and race as Almasy now no longer fulfills the stereotype of a European. This is one way the author has brought in the postcolonial understanding of the text. The shifting identities is also part of the text, and as already mentioned the novel revolves around the construction of the cultural identity as a continuous process and not something that is certain.

The war is one of the many reasons for the dislocation, and this plays a major role in changing the identity of the characters. The colonized have also trouble with their identity once the colonizers is out of the equation. They are unaware about identity, and their national identities are also in stake. For example, the novel appears to suggest that Hana is shellshocked and has lost her faith in the war. This instance can be highlighted by pointing out she has discarded her uniform: “Coming out of what had happened to her during the war, she drew her own few rules to herself. She would not be ordered again or carry out duties for the greater good. She would care only for the burned patient – her only communication was with him”(14). She has withdrawn herself and they all are suffering from the culturally dislocation.

The villa becomes the epicenter of this cultural hybridity. The four main character share the villa, and in this place they leave behind their old cultural identities. It seems

as though they are shedding their skins. The shedding skins can be taken as their old identities and how they are have the new identity, or to be clearer they all have a hybrid culture. The skin itself is closely related to the identity in the novel. It shows their identification. Caravaggio tracked many spies in the desert and he also tracked Almasy. But once he came to know about him he wanted to somehow construct a new identity for him. Caravaggio uses the exact words like, “Perhaps invent a skin for him, the way tannic acid camouflages a burned man“s rawness,”(117). He is suggesting here that the tone of skins determines the identity, and by changing the skin one can change their identity.

The English patient indeed uses the narration to camouflage himself and many are not be able to identify him. And Caravaggio makes a story to change his skin. The reason for his camouflage might be to hide from the fact that he helped the German spies during the war. The cultural construction is very well noticed by Caravaggio who is shocked to see Hana is a different person now from the person he had seen in Canada. The war and this villa has evolved her, and like Hall"s theory of identity in which he says "never completed- always in process"(Hall 2). There is however a patter in the construction of Hana"s identity construction. Kip, the bomb diffuser envisions her after the end of the year in this way:

She will, he realizes now, always have a serious face. She has moved from being a young woman into having the angular look of a queen, someone who has made her face with her desire to be a certain kind of person. He still likes that about her. Her smartness, the fact that she did not inherit that look or that beauty, but that it was something searched for and that it will always reflect a present stage of her character. (300)

II. CONCLUSION

Her identity has evolved because she has made it a point to be a certain person. She suggests as though culture can be chosen and the countenance. As Kip means that her beauty will always represent her current stage. This suggestion is apt according to the theory of Hall. The fluidity of cultural identification can always be seen in the novel. Anyway this paper has shown the postcolonial cultural hybridization with the help of the characters. The way they have all come to the villa from different cultures. The villa is like a small colonized place and all the character coming there has made it a hybrid place. This paper has also shown how certain, intense problems in life can change the cultural perspectives. Thus, it is sure that the English Patient has a rich postcolonial theme.

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