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**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Post-colonial Cultural Identity in Ondaatje's *The English Patient***

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**ABSTRACT**

Postcolonial criticism examines society and literary culture together to reject the Eurocentric view of indigenous literature and culture which it is the literature of. This study employs Franz Fanon's expression of cultural identity to figure out the postcolonial literary culture that makes readers realize the considerable determinations of post-colonial subject; hence, retrieves the lost cultural identities of post-colonial subject in the wake of World War II. This emphasis on the cultural identity of the post-colonial subject also explores the Eurocentric ignorance of colonized cultural history – social and cultural embedment. This issue of cultural identity wherein postcolonialism dares to delve is the locus of this research, which argues how the post-colonial subjects in *The English Patient* adopt a new form of their cultural identities by escaping the stereotypes about their names, bodies and birthplaces.

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**Introduction**

Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) has frequently been mentioned as a postcolonial narrative. It discusses the comparison of centric and ex-centric histories during World War II and post-World War II. This discussion argues the colonial idea of cultural identity and gradually shifts to the post-colonial cultural identity. This paradigm-shift not only defies the 'subjectivity' of cultural identity but also encounters the identity per se. In the delimited novel, the 'marginalized' characters like Hana, Kip and Caravaggiogo against 'Eurocentrism'. At the same time, the value of (the English patient) the central character's downfall permitted this paradigm shift. Initially, readers cannot recognize the patient whom Hana cared for since he is borne down and cannot be recognized. He was not even capable of recollecting his name. So the protagonist of the delimited fiction is, one way or another, a tale since he is "assumed to be English (thus, the English patient) when in hospital and the stories that develop around him express the identities of a number of ex-centric

characters but seem to be unable to absolutely determine the identity of the central character" (Moya, 2002, p.6).

This study explores the efforts of the individuals to retrieve their lost identities regarding their cultural backgrounds. In *The English Patient* (1992) opening, the characters are not ready, psychologically, to face their lost cultural identities, their loved ones, their lands and their ambitions. The characters' identities are being formed and reformed by their efforts to run away from their past identities. However, it does not matter how passionately the characters disguise their suffering because it reappears due to actual proceedings, such as the disastrous blasts of two nuclear weapons on Japan. By accommodating the opinion that identities and communal structure cannot be estranged, this article emphasizes the World War II in the novel because it is an experience that has affected society extensively.

### Literature Review

Edward Said argues that many orientalists keep emphasizing that it is India's fate to be a Britain colony:

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of other... The Orient was organized not only because it was discovered to be "Oriental" in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be \_\_that is, submitted to being\_\_ made Oriental. (Said, 1978, pp. 5-6)

However, the colonizers' coming was, according to Fanon (1986), "unconsciously expected - even desired - by the future subject people" (p.99). But "not all people can be colonized; only those who experience this need [for dependency]" (Fanon, 1986, p.99). But, the 'affiliation' between colonized and colonizers, according to Boland (2002), gets a paradigm-shift as the colonized recognize the "British imperialism finally in its callous indifference to Asia" (p. 34). This beginning of the hostility between West and East, according to Clarke (2002), is not a new subject: "[T]he epic conflict between Hellenes and Persians, giving rise to the mythical contrast between heroic, liberty, loving and dynamic west and the despotic, stagnant and passive East" (Clarke, 2002, p.4).

*The English Patient* (1992), according to Phillips (1999), highlights the conflict between the West and the East hence acts as "a vehicle for social, political and moral reflection" (Phillips, 1999, p.121) of the microcosm of the world. For him, the story-time of the delimited novel -

April 1945, the ending of World War II -displays a historic revolution piercing a colonial world into a post-colonial one. The prewar period is "still a colonial world, whilst the future is post-colonial" (Phillips, 1999, p. 6). The characters of *The English Fiction* identify their cultural identity with the emerging associations

among themselves. These associations among themselves do not come to an end until the end of the war. Even the death of the English patient could not halt the play of the center (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 3). This means the story of the center will carry on since it is a case of what Derrida (1978) says, "infinitely redoubling" (p. 297).

Lois Tyson (2002) argues that the context of the delimited novel also carries out a vibrant part in the expansion of postcolonial cultural identity. The poor characters in Tuscan Villa are sufferers of the traumas of the adjacent world. It upsets their dogmas regarding their manipulated identities. Hence, the "identity and its cultural milieu inhabit, reflect and define each other. Their relationship is mutually constitutive and dynamically unstable" (Tyson, 2002, p.280). According to Tyson's recommendation, the progress of cultural identity depends on the cultural standards as well as individuals' own determination and necessities. Both the cultural standards and individual requirements grow with time. Thus, nothing can be believed permanent, impossible, or independent in making cultural identity because everything is imperative and shared: the last part of *The English Patient*, according to Jewinski (1996), looks towards the prospect of Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio, "the immigrants of the twentieth century" (p. 178).

### Theoretical Framework

This qualitative cum descriptive study argues Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) concerning Franz Fanon's 'subjective consciousness' and 'the retrieval of past'. Fanon (1986) argues that the stereotypes about black people are specifically prevalent in the world. He calls for his people to turn these stereotypes down and reclaim their 'subjective consciousness' as not "a Negro" but "the Negro" (p. 127). In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon underlines that the colonized should use their past "with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope" (p. 280). He urges his people to defend their black identity concerning their transcendental past: "[F]rom the opposite end of the white world a magical Negro culture was hailing [them]" (Fanon, 1986, p. 123). Vine Deloria Jr. (1999) stresses another solution. He argues:

Only in that way can we transcend the half-millennium of culture shock brought about by the confrontation with Western civilization. When we leave the culture shock behind we will be masters of our own fate again and be able to determine for ourselves what kind of lives we will lead." (Deloria, 1999, p. 153)

Fanon (1986) wants to establish a society based on equality, a race less society. He claims to forget, forgive and wants only to love. But he thinks that it is impossible because of the superiority complex of the white man. He explains that "a man was expected to behave like a man; I was expected to behave like a black man or at least like a nigger" (Fanon, 1986, p.114). It explains that white men never suggest that a nigger is a man. So, Fanon (1986) has views that "it would give me no pleasure to announce that the black problem is my problem and mine alone and it is up to me to study it" (p. 86). In this way, he exposes the discriminatory behavior of

whites who penetrate this idea that their primary purpose of colonization is to civilize the black. However, they used the method of divide and rule. Because of these barriers of race and nation, Fanon insists on recalling the glorified black past. Therefore, he urges his fellows to abolish "the myth of Negro that Negroes are savages, brutes, illiterates" (Fanon, 1986, p. 117).

### **Post-colonial Cultural Identities in *The English Patient***

There is a pathology of colonization that we must understand the creation of the communal, dogmatic, and monetary clash but more essentially we must comprehend the emotional complications generated by colonization, so we as humans can deconstruct the Leviathan we live in and make a world constructed on traditional variety, autonomy, and related benefit. Postcolonialism, in this regard, probes into race, identity, language, nationalism and marginality to fashion the understanding of (post)colonial subject. Hence, to categorize postcolonialism concerning the issues it preoccupies, this article discerns its affiliation with philosophy, psychology, economy, international affairs, sociology, history, etc. The postcolonial theory acknowledges that the identity does not come out from necessary impulsive selfhood, but is mostly resolute by the association between 'self and other'. One recognizes oneself as the part of a racial group through one's dissimilarity from a supposed 'foreigner', as part of a group through distinction from an 'outsider'. In this novel, *The English Patient* (1992), all four characters are displaced individuals who begin "shedding [the] skins" of earlier selves and try to find new cultural identities through the relationship they form at the end of World War II. Through the endeavors of Hana, the English patient, Caravaggio and Kip, to retrieve their lost cultural identities, this study argues the shape of identity concerning colonial and anticolonial nationalism.

#### **Hana**

In Ondaatje's earlier novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*, Hana is a kid of mixed parentage. In *The English Patient*, she comes forward for war service and abortion because there is war. On the other hand, the war took the father of her unborn child and her father also. Furthermore, her mental condition is not well because of the devastation of war and its particular effects on her family. Continuous dealing with a wounded and dying person (the English Patient) pushed her to the verge of a nervous breakdown. All such circumstances make her decision not to bring a child into a world of chaos. After the movement of the Canadian Infantry Division to Italy, she decides to stay at the villa San Girolamo to nurse the dying burnt figure, the English patient. She has to erase her identity by cutting her hair and hiding the mirrors. She did not want to get an identity in this chaos, so changed her physical appearance by cutting her hair:

When she woke, she picked up a pair of scissors out of the porcelain bowl, leaned over and began to cut her hair, not concerned with shape or length, just cutting it away--the irritation of its presence during the previous days still in her mind--when she had bent forward and her hair had touched blood in a wound. She

would have nothing to link her, to lock her, to death. She gripped what was left to make sure there were no more strands and turned again to face the rooms full of the wounded. [...] She never looked at herself in mirrors again. (Ondaatje, pp. 49-50)

But at the end of the novel, when she writes her mother:

"I am sick of Europe, Clara. I want to come home. To your small cabin and pink rock in Georgian Bay. I will take a bus up to parry Sound. And from main land send a message over the shortwave radio out towards the pancakes. And wait for you, wait to see the silhouette of you in a canoe coming to rescue me in front of his place we all entered, betraying you. (Ondaatje, p. 296)

Her letter shows her zest for another version of identity. But her letters to Kip also shows that she could not leave the old version of her identity. it reveals that Hana is emotionally 'affected', to restore her lost cultural identity because she is stuck into her waving recollection. She is emotionally broken up after day by day, living in her strange house. The surrounding villa reminds her experience of dying soldiers as a military nurse. The 'home' as a remedy is not sufficient: she is still concerned with the English patient. The ways of her destiny are undoubtedly not chosen, as she lets herself float from extreme to extreme.

### **The English Patient**

The story of the English patient himself is renovated in the novel from diaries, fragments of recollections often under the control of morphine, and from further confirmation provided by his interrogator, Caravaggio. An aspect of ambiguity is formed about some of the main facts of his life. As Count Ladislaus de Almas, he had joined a desert group of people whose national identity has been erased with time. Now they are no more English, German, Hungarian, and African but desert explorers. In the early 1930s, they are searching for the missing oasis, Zerzura. Being an "oasis society," they "gradually became nationless" (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 138), though, as the devastation of World War II prevailed, Almas remarks that they began to give up personal devotion for the sake of patriotic jealousy. After joining the Cliftons, patrician English newlyweds, there is hatred amid Almas and Katharine Clifton, but this soon grows into a passionate adulterous fervor. Setting in Cairo, the affair threatens the community.

On the other hand, Katharine's husband has been making an investigation for British Intelligence about their explorations. After discovering his wife's infidelity, he tries to kill them all with his plane. Clifton dies, but Almas and Katharine survive the crash, though she is seriously injured. Leaving her in the Cave of Swimmers, he searches for some transport. On the way, Almas is refused to assist by a patrolling English unit as he fails to provide sufficient information about Katharine's married name, the evidence of her British identity. Desperate to come again to her, Almas joins the Germans, who consent to offer transportation in replace for his aid in guiding the spy Eppler across the desert to Cairo. He returns in 1942 to the Cave of

Swimmers. He paints Katharine's dead body with pigments from the primitive cave paintings. He tries to carry it to a plane that had not been used for many years next to the base camp. The plane catches fire. He is rescued by a faction of travelers for whom the perception of nations is worthless.

Where was he? What civilization was this that understood the predictions of whether and light? El Ahmar or El Abyadd, for they must be *one* of the northwest desert tribes....His favorite garden in the world had been the grass garden at Kew, the colours so delicate and various like ash on a hill. (Ondaatje,pp. 8-9).

The patient's very Englishness is an issue of referencing recognized stereotypes, trout streams, Kew Gardens, "flower beds in Gloucestershire," birdcalls, "ask me about Don Bradman. "Ask me about marmite" suggests that it is an entity and culture that is imitated, in the similar mode "his voice . . . bring[s] forth a flutter of the English wood-thrush he said was found only in Essex" (Ondaatje, p. 112). Parody and mimicry are characteristics of post-colonial writing. These conceptual plans allow the text to inhabit the existing civilization while maintaining an ironical detachment from it.

Uncomfortable in the communal part essential by Cairo civilization, the English patient gives the impression most himself in the territorial boundaries of the desert, "slipping between the enemy," or in the luminal region between referent and signifier, at the point where the world is becoming language:

"It was as if he had walked under the millimeter of haze just above the inked fibers of a map, that pure zone between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller. . . The place they had come to, to be their best selves, to be unconscious of ancestry" (Ondaatje,p. 146).

The story of his interaction with Katharine's dead body close to the end of the novel is the infringement of another boundary between the dead and living. Even after surviving the plane crash, he not only lost his true shape but also his name and became an English patient. His identity is retrieved by other characters but this is not the real version of his identity.

### **Caravaggio**

The third member of the villa is the Italian-Canadian, Caravaggio. This character is also carried over from *In the Skin of a Lion*, where he was a friend of Hana's father. In this novel, he is shown to have developed a deep love for the child Hana. After recognizing his skill as a thief, the Allies employ him as a spy working for British intelligence in Cairo. After some striking adventure, he is lastly detained and endangered with the elimination of his thumbs unless he discloses confidential information. He refuses to accept but the elimination of his thumbs compelled him to reveal identities. Like the English patient, fanatical with the disappointment of his affiliation with Katharine and his failure to save her life, Caravaggio is preoccupied with reminiscences of his agony. Although the novel is not clear about his objectives,

a mixture of personal fault at betrayal, longing for exacting revenge and to place Hana free from her obsession with the patient, makes him seek out Almsy, resolute to set up his identity as the spy who helped Rommel. As, under questioning, the difficulties of the patient/Almsy's objectives and circumstances are at last exposed, questions of national treachery come to seem unrelated in contrast with the personal connections. Caravaggio has established with the patient. Till the end of the novel, he has retrieved some specific versions of the English patient's identity. Like Hanna, he also returns to Canada, where he may retrieve his identity. But he is also supposed to think about his trauma.

Some critics are doubted that the presence of this personality was needed since he belonged to a different plot. Being a Canadian secret agent in North Africa served for Allied Forces, in 1942, he was ordered to visit Tobruk after the invasion of the German Army in Cairo. This makes his identity miscellaneous and distorted as well. Germany forced him to get the list of all the spies working for the British Army or Allies in North Africa, but his loyalty gets the cost of his thumbs of both hands.

Caravaggio is an isolated and self-centered character, but the fault is not his. It was the war that makes him isolated and selfish. War, the devil's manipulation, cast out every faith, vision, devotion, and trust. All the characters get nothing from the war. The man with destroyed emotions is just a mark of the war devastation. He alive with hatred for others and this hatred is the gift of war.

## **Kip**

The fourth member of the villa is (Kirpal Singh) Kip, a Sikh, who serves as a sapper in the British Army. As a colonized, he represents cultural hybridity, which rejects the ideology of nationalism. His double perspective of hybrid or in-between identity disturbs the binaries. But the ending of the novel sees the affirmation of Sikh identity and the development of nationalism. From the discourse among them, this article realized how he rejects his family norms and values and joins the colonizers in contrast with his anti-colonial brother. Despite initial feelings of exclusion, he adjusts himself to Lord Suffolk's family, who becomes a surrogate father. Being a domestic other, he got more value in English society as compared to others. His experience makes him enjoy the authority in some particular cases as Hardy, a fellow sapper, and a colonizer representative used to call him 'Sir'.

On the other hand, Lord Suffolk and his group also provide him a sense of identity among colonizers. So, he is baptized, becomes a lover of English traditions, and became Kip rather than Kirpal Singh. He used to sing the song: "They're changing guard at Buckingham palace/Christopher Robin went down with Alice" (Ondaatje, p. 211). This is the song that his fellow sapper Hardy used to sing when he is at work. In this sense, all these indicate his 'mimicry' of English culture. He seems assimilated into English traditions but certain things like his turban and his body reflection show his hybrid identity. But all this affiliation to English culture will decline after the death of Lord Suffolk and his assistant, Miss Morden. This

sudden death of Lord Suffolk make Kip leave the bomb disposal unit and he joined the sappers in the Italian campaign. He entered into the second phase of his identity formation; and discovered as a dying burnt patient who has to be called the English patient, in a dangerously unstable villa left by Allied Forces. All four characters in the villa linked by a shared experience of war Suffering. So their developing relations made them capable of establishing a new type of identity. Once again, Kip began to re-establish bonds of relationship with colonizers and celebrated this by organizing a birthday for Hana. This bond was developed because of the warm behavior of Western residents in the villa, namely Hana, the English patient/Almásy, Caravaggio. The birthday dinner became the symbol of their friendship. This bond of friendship happened because all the characters lost their identities partially. So their fragmented identities made it possible to redefine them in a new way. But here again, this stability proves temporary.

News from the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki also develops the barriers between East and West between the brown and white races. Here Kip also takes a shift from his personal view of identity, believing that a western country would never commit such an atrocity against another western country. Now he considers the English patient responsible for all devastation as a critic suggests that a person's bad death represents the whole nation to whom he belonged. Such type of feelings induced him to kill the English patient. Kip's general views against the West, particularly against the English are racial which is quite opposite to the peaceful atmosphere of the villa where such racialism does not exist. Once again, his ambivalent behavior tends towards his origin and under the influence of his cultural displacement that is a consequence of his disappointment with adopted land; apparently, he abandoned the adopted traditions of colonizers' culture. Gazing at the photograph of his family, he questions himself. "His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here" (Ondaatje, p. 281). He is no longer Kip now but Kirpal Singh. According to his family's norms, he became a doctor and married a brown woman with two children. In the last chapter, he is "Kirpal". It seems that he has retrieved his lost identity; however, he regrets not saying a single word to Hana at the time of departure. But he did not try to reestablish his relations. So that, Kip, who is manipulated by colonizers and adopted English customs, incidentally withdraws from the adopted tradition and abandons his Western friend, because of his general views against West or white. This shows his trend toward his origin that depends upon certain cultural and national norms. So, Kip, who is about to like the English patient's idea of a nationless map of the world, again focuses on retrieving his national identity.

## **Conclusion**

The delimited text's deep study explains neither the English patient as a supposed colonizer nor Kip as a colonized retrieves a single, unified and stable identity. All the residents of the villa are linked by a shared experience of war. They are displaced from their native land. Their traumas both as colonizers and colonized, induced them to get close to one another. As this is the only way to heal them against the wounded environment. Their friendship dissolved their old identities



and made them establish new identities. But the aggressive behavior of the West in the shape of dropping the atomic bomb on Japan makes Eastern (Kip) revert to his traditional national identity. However, being colonized, he remains ambivalent, like a mimic man who is “almost the same but not quite [for] mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 42). The “double vision” of mimicry for Bhabha betrays the ambivalence of the colonized subject and uses the discourse of colonialism as a means of resistance to the colonized menace the colonizer.

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