



Postcolonial Discourse on Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*

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Abstract

The English Patient (1992) is Michael Ondaatje’s most acclaimed novel to date. “Set in Tuscany, Italy, at the end of the Second World War, the novel holds readers’ attention by both the dramatic circumstances and astonishing pasts of the characters in this epic tale of the physical and emotional damage inflicted by war and love (Canadian Encyclopedia, 2013).” In *The English Patient* (1992), the empire is not only writing back but it is writing with sublimity and verve, from the margins to the centre using the English language which in itself is a colonial legacy. In this story, Ondaatje intertwines the past and the present through conversations between the characters as they reminisce about the past. The extradiegetic or omniscient frame narratives involve internal focalization that shifts between time and between the characters, resulting into the fragmentation of the narrative, rendering different postcolonial perspectives about the events in the story to the reader.

Key words: Postcolonial; Identity; War; Maps

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INTRODUCTION

All the characters in the story live together in a bombed out villa in Italy after the German retreat at the end of World War II, leaving behind death, destruction and unexploded bombs. The uniting factor of all four

characters in the novel is the villa San Girolamo where they are all camped, thrown together by the war and at the same time damaged by the war—just like the villa itself. Hana, instead of escaping with the other nurses, decides to stay in the villa and looks after the English Patient, about whom she knows little about; only that he had been rescued by the Bedouin tribe from a plane crash and was burnt beyond recognition. They are soon joined by Caravaggio, a family friend of Hana and a thief working for the British Intelligence, whose thumbs were cut off by the Germans because he was caught attempting to steal a camera from a woman. Hana’s “desire to take care of the ‘English’ patient, and Caravaggio is an attempt to halt a process of self-destruction that had started during the war (Hilger 2004). A bomb disposal expert, a Sikh from India who was trained as a sapper, Kirpal Singh (Kip) also joins them and makes camp in the garden of the villa and soon becomes lovers with Hana (Ondaatje, 1992).

ANALYSIS

All these characters are postcolonial hybrids alienated by the war and experiencing an identity crisis. They found themselves caught up in the destructive war brought on the world by the west and are reluctant to face the real world. The English Patient, who is actually a Hungarian called Almasy, is an explorer who served both Britain and Germany as a spy during the war before being burnt beyond recognition when he crashed in the desert and was rescued by the Bedouin. Hana is a Canadian nurse working for the British, taking care of the injured and dying yet unable to save her own unborn child and her father; both of whom she lost during the war. Her delusion and state of being lost is manifest when the opportunity presents itself for her to escape with the other nurses and she opts to stay with her dying patient in the ruined villa San Girolamo; “She and the Englishman had insisted on remaining behind when the other nurses and patients moved to a safer location in the south (Ondaatje, 1992).”

Caravaggio too is a Canadian and a thief by profession before the war and during the war. He says, "Really I was still a thief. No great patriot. No great hero. They had just made my skills official (Ondaatje, 1992)." As a spy for the British, the Germans caught him and chopped off his thumbs after a lot of torture. Kip, a Sikh from India, leaves native India as a sapper—building bridges and roads for the British—and later becomes a bomb diffuser for them, two of the most dangerous professions during the war; attested to by these words from the narrative: "The Eight Army came upon river after river of destroyed bridges, and their sapper units clambered down banks on ladders of rope within enemy gunfire and swam or waded across (Ondaatje, 1992)." Despite being far away from home and surrounded by such danger most of the time, Kip never forgot his turban, and remains proud of his Indian practices; "I grew up in India, (Ondaatje, 1992)," he proudly responds to Caravaggio who was making fun of his frequent hand washing, yet he drinks English tea and listens to Western music.

Kip is a symbolic representation of the ambivalent colonial subject, who is brainwashed to serve the interest of the colonizer against the indigenes. According to Ashcroft et al, ambivalence is the split in the colonized other characterized by attraction and repulsion of the colonizer and the colonizer's cultural identity. He asserts that colonialism thrived and lasted so long simply because of ambivalent subjects (Ashcroft, 2000). Colonialism was characterized by wholesale brainwashing of the ambivalent colonized other and only a few resisted such brainwashing such as Kip's brother who was jailed for refusing to fight for the British. "He refused to agree to any situation where the English had the power. So they dragged him into their jail (Ondaatje, 1992)." Kip's enlistment into the army was incomplete without the familiar branding of property practiced by slave masters. He compares "the yellow chalk scribbled on the side of the bombs" with "the yellow chalk scribbled onto their bodies as they lined up in the Lahore courtyard (Ondaatje, 1992)," during the enlistment process.

The ultimate outcome of this whole process was the colonial legacy of stripping the subaltern of both cultural identity and personal identity as reflected in the text through Kirpal Singh whose real name was forgotten within a week and his demolition team took to calling him Kip (Ondaatje 1992). He confesses losing his cultural identity when he said: "I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from your country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I'd be banished. If I tied the wrong kind of knot in a tie I was out (Ondaatje 1992)." Hilger describes him as "the product of the English colonial power in India and exemplifies the domesticated Other (Hilger,

2004)." Fortunately, realization dawns on Kip towards the end of the story. He regains part of his racial or cultural consciousness and his personal identity when atomic bombs were dropped on the Japanese and he remembers what his brother had said: "Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them. But we, oh, we were easily impressed – by speeches and medals and your ceremonies (Ondaatje, 1992)." Hana experiences a similar reawakening of her consciousness in her monologue towards the end of the story. "I am sick of Europe, Clara. I want to come home. To your small cabin and pink rock in Georgian Bay. [...] How did you become so smart? How did you become so determined? How were you not fooled like us (Ondaatje, 1992)?" According to Hilger this rediscovery of the self and personal identity was possible through turning to books. "In an attempt to redefine their identity, the characters turn to books, themselves partly destroyed by the war, that thematize the representation of the cultural Other (Hilger, 2004)."

The three characters—Hana, Kip and Caravaggio—are also representations of general displacement suffered by the rest of the world at the behest of the western colonial masters. In its imperial drive, the colonial masters used colonial subjects not only to suppress dissent within the colony but also to be shipped off to foreign lands to fight wars for the crown. Ondaatje's sapper and bomb disposal expert Kip, Hana the nurse and Caravaggio the spy are symbolic representation of this colonial subjugation and displacement. Kip in particular signifies this displacement and feeling of exile to a greater extent within him, finding it very hard not to be different: "he remains the foreigner, the Sikh (Ondaatje 1992)." Thus, Caravaggio laments: "The trouble with all of us is we are where we shouldn't 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? [...] Even the trees are thick with diseases we brought. The armies indoctrinate you and leave you here and they move off somewhere else to cause trouble (Ondaatje 1992)." Killingray (1982) throws light on this colonial practice: "During the Second World War the West African colonies became important to Britain's war effort as a source of manpower and raw materials. From 1940 onwards West Africa supplied over 200,000 soldiers and labourers for military service in the East African campaign, North Africa, and after 1943, in Asia." It is the same practice experienced by the citizens of other colonies like India and Canada as illustrated in the story. This has led to general displacement of colonial citizens throughout the war period and its immediate aftermath. Ondaatje's (1992) line, "Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be pukkah", mirrors the extent to which colonial subjects sacrifice themselves for the colonial master.

The characterization and setting of the story on the theme of war and love brings into question who was

fighting who and over what during the war. The traditional history books glorify the allied efforts during the war, which *The English Patient* fell short of and instead, silently and persistently kept whispering to the reader that the term World War II is a misnomer. In the story the west waged war on the west in North Africa and Europe over a European threat to colonize Europe. The English patient describes it succinctly: “—a battlefield eight hundred miles deep into the desert. Whippet tanks, Blenheim medium-range bombers. Gladiator biplane fighters. Eight thousand men. But who was the enemy? Who were the allies of this place? All of Europe were fighting there wars in North Africa (Ondaatje, 1992).” Germany and her allies fought Britain and her allies over territories in Europe and eventually extended the savagery to the colonies in a drive to mobilize resources for their war machineries. “The Barbarians versus the Barbarians (Ondaatje, 1992).

This gives the story a metonymic revisionist view of the war narrative within a postcolonial rendition through discourse and setting. It also throws back light on what European history books would describe as Europe's missionary vision of bringing civilization to primitive countries in their early voyages of exploration. According to the story, civilization already prevails in the so called primitive countries even among the desert people. When Almásy found himself being cared for by the Bedouin, he says: “What civilization was this that understood the prediction of weather and light? El Ahmar or El Abyadd, for they must be one of the northwest desert tribes. Those who could catch a man out of the sky (Ondaatje, 1992).” Indeed, Almásy even describes the man nursing him as an archangel because of the great skill and care he took to preserve his life. Commenting on the Eurocentric binary presented in the novel, Totossy (2004) states that “the novel questions and undermines the opposition between the ‘civilized’ and the ‘barbarian’”. Ondaatje also suggests that certain historical realities, such as the dropping of the atomic bomb, force characters into a binary that they have been trying to deconstruct throughout the narrative. Europe's missionary visions soon turned into economic exploitation through slavery, colonial bondage and neo-colonialism for the entire ‘other’ by Europe.

The wreckage left behind by the war is portrayed in the disfigured burnt English patient, the handicapped Caravaggio and the ruined villa. World War II ended but left Europe in ruins. Germany disintegrated into two separate countries—taking nearly half a century for reunification, Britain took nearly sixty years to pay off its war debt (BBC News 2006) and France only survived by cunningly manipulating the economies of its colonial territories to prop up its own economy. In the post-colonial world, the imagery is staggeringly similar to post war Europe. Some economies were in shambles and depended on foreign debts and aid to remain viable, leaders of newly independent countries who seemed to

align themselves with the eastern bloc were overthrown in violent coups, killed or jailed—Nkrumah of Ghana and Lumumba of Congo are good examples (Jimmi, 1985), while some other countries split into two, such as India and Pakistan, Sudan and South Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, after long bloody civil wars. The face of the English patient was burnt beyond recognition, so was post war Europe and post-colonial Africa. Indeed Africa's history is a palimpsest represented by Almásy—the amnesiac English patient. Hilger (2004) refers to him as “the unsettling presence at the end of colonialism and the war because history writes the problems upon his body.” Prior to colonialism, Africa was a source of slaves, the Middle Passage in Europe's Triangular trade, then Africa became a land of colonies and a source of raw materials for imperial Europe, and after independence the neo-colonial economic ties ensured that Africa remains a market for European economies. Africa's heritage and history had either been described as primitive and barbaric in Eurocentric discourse, or forgotten and totally left out in most European history books. Hilger asserts that, “The figure of the ‘English’ patient causes this binary to collapse in the context of the twentieth century. The term ‘barbarian’ now becomes applied to the colonizing powers who claim to be the ‘civilized.’ The ‘civilized’ barbarity is less deniable and more visible (Hilger, 2004).”

The unknown identity of The English patient is a way to critique the western unchecked urge to define and categorize non-western people based on Eurocentric views. It is also a direct condemnation of their colonial need to own nations. He is “called ‘English’ patient because he was brought to a British base camp (Hilger 2004),” yet he is probably Hungarian. “Everything about him was very English except for the fact that his skin was tarred black” (Ondaatje, 1992). He is considered English but in a black body, and he does not want to be categorized, illustrated by the fact that he served both sides during the war, and both of whom he loathes and during his expeditions in the desert, he lost all forms of identity. “We were Germans, English, Hungarian, and African—all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states (Ondaatje, 1992).” This reversal of roles and loss of identity is also exemplified by the power associated with the desert. The desert, we are told in the story, transforms people into what suits it most. “The desert strips them of any form of identification. It makes them like its own nature, without defining contours and without race markers (Abu Baker, 2008).” It strips people off their identity just like colonialism. “All pilots who fall into the desert—none of them come back with identification (Ondaatje, 1992).” According to Abu Baker (2008) even Caravaggio's identity was “rewritten”, when the Germans discovered his identity by cutting of his thumbs—the mutilation in itself giving him the identity of an accursed professional thief.

Intertwined within the narrative is a postcolonial rendition of the role of maps and cartography and the seemingly insignificant part played by the Royal Geographic Society in the colonial escapade. Maps and Cartography and the geographical society feature prominently in *The English Patient* and they serve as motif for a postcolonial reading of the text with regards to their historic relationship with the colonial establishment. The Royal Geographical Society, founded in 1830, had a history “closely allied for many of its earlier years with ‘colonial’ exploration in Africa, the Indian subcontinent, the Polar Regions, and central Asia especially and it enshrines such famous names as Livingstone, Stanley, Scott, Shackleton, Hunt and Hillary (Royal Geographical Society, n.d)”. “These explorations are supposedly conducted for scientific purposes. However, they are performed for military and colonial purposes (Abu Baker 2008).” The society and its explorers were the harbingers of colonialism as they would map out routes to faraway lands and eventually such lands become colonies of the British crown.

According to Hilger (2004), this power of maps and weapons was reversed in the story to “undermine colonial power more directly by appropriating the ‘English’ patient’s colonial knowledge to the tribes own ends: ‘For some he draws maps that go beyond their own boundaries and for other tribes too he explains the mechanics of guns’ (Ondaatje, 1992). The ‘English’ patient yields the knowledge of those instruments which made colonization largely possible in the first place, maps and weapons.” In the words of the English patient, the importance of the knowledge of maps saved his life when he crashed in the desert. “The Bedouins were keeping me alive for a reason. I was useful, you see. Someone there had assumed I had a skill when my plane crashed in the desert. I am a man who can recognize an unnamed town by its skeletal shape on a map (Ondaatje 1992).” Abu Baker writes that this “knowledge made him a very dangerous traitor when he joined the Germans. His vast knowledge worried the Allies (Abu Baker 2008).” Similarly the power of maps is metaphorically portrayed in Kip’s job at diffusing bombs. “Maps play an important role in Kip’s life. To him, they mean the difference between life and death. He uses them in deconstructing bombs and mines which he reduces to their skeletal shape (Abu Baker, 2008).”

Perhaps the most singularly destructive act by the colonialist with the use of maps is the events of 1884-85 in Berlin—The Berlin Conference. “The Berlin Conference was Africa’s undoing in more ways than one. The colonial powers superimposed their domains on the African continent. By the time independence returned to Africa in 1950, the realm had acquired a legacy of political fragmentation that could neither be eliminated nor made to operate satisfactorily (Rosenberg, 2014).” It was during this three months conference hosted by Otto

Von Bismarck—chancellor of Germany—when the entire continent of Africa was carved up and shared among the colonial overlords using only maps and diagrams (Stone, 1988). Instead of using maps to advance science, maps were used to colonize other nations. Looking at current maps of former colonies, one would not fail to notice unnatural, artificial boundaries between countries, some of them just straight lines drawn along points of interest to the colonizers.

The suffering brought about as a result of the conference could only be equalled by the Atlantic Slave trade—the precursor to colonialism. According to Baker (2008), “map making suggests a future military invasion of a geographical area that is being mapped to facilitate the movement of the invading troops and to highlight the strategic points of defence/attack for these troops.” Using maps in such a way for the imperial needs of colonialism makes Almsy to wonder: “This country—had I charted it and turned it into a place of war (Ondaatje, 1992)?” Evidently cartography and all forms of knowledge of the colonies became a tool for invasion and subjugation in the hands of the colonizers. “The colonizers constantly gather information about the geography of the land and the characteristics of the people who live in it. This knowledge guarantees the ‘smooth’ dominance of the colonizer, and it functions to alienate the colonized in their own country by changing its geographical and even ecological identity (Abu Baker 2008).

The Berlin Conference divided people of the same culture, language and ethnicity into separate countries like Gambia and Senegal and offered mighty chunks of land to other countries or individuals—King Leopold of Belgium became the sole proprietor of Congo, a country several times the size of his kingdom and a land he never set foot on. This affirms Huggan’s statement that “the ‘reality’ represented numerically by the map not only conforms to a particular version of the world but to a version which is specifically designed to empower its makers (Huggan, 1989). What king Leopold did in the Belgian-Congo as referenced in the story by Kip is just an example of general servitude and indentured labour in all of the colonies. The subaltern was just a replacement of the slave, suffering at the hands of the colonial master in their avaricious exploitation of raw materials for their economies. The death toll and suffering during that period is what Kip’s statement brings to mind when the US army dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: “When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman. You had king Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English (Ondaatje, 1992).” Kip’s metaphor places guilt at the door step of the whole west for the disaster of the atomic bomb just like they are guilty of colonialism and all its associated abuses. Abu Baker (2008) describes Kip’s reaction to the

bombing as rebelling against western racism “and casts away his ‘colonized shell’. He evolves from the ‘cocoon’ of colonization and flies away like a ‘butterfly’, back into the country he was born in.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this postcolonial discourse on *The English Patient* offers an analysis of the characters in the story, the motif of maps and the role of the Royal Geographical society as portrayed in the story. Ondaatje repossesses colonial tools such as the characters in the story, historical narratives and cartography and he forges them into a postcolonial tool to write back to the empire. The main characters of the story are all colonial subjects brought together by World War II, which in itself was orchestrated by the architects of colonialism. The characters are seen to be ambivalent, alienated and hybrids who are displaced by the war and experience identity crises as a result of the war. This is equated with the colonial desire to define, categorise and subjugate everything about the colonies to suit their interest. The disfigured characters in the story as well as the ruined villa do not only serve to portray the destruction caused by imperial Europe but also symbolize the barbaric nature of colonialism and war. The story further questions the war narrative as well as Europe's mission to civilize the rest of the world. The burnt, unrecognisable face of The English patient and his amnesia also becomes a palimpsest for the rewriting of history and a shift from Eurocentric narratives.

Finally, running parallel to the characterization and setting of the story and attracting immense postcolonial critique is the role of cartography, mapping and the Royal Geographical society. “*The English Patient* presents the reader with the danger of colonial sciences, such as mapmaking, and the concomitant power they give to the colonisers (Abu Baker, 2008).” The story makes constant reference to these powerful tools of colonisation, leaving no question as to the role they played in the colonization process. “The novel concludes with Kip learning that it does not matter how close one gets to the colonizers, for one remains treated as an outsider/‘Other’ (Abu Baker 2008, p.107).” A Mandingo saying goes “no matter how long a piece of wood stays in the river, it would never become a crocodile.”

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