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## Non-Belonging and Dislocation in *The English Patient* and *The Mimic Men*

Cengiz KARAGÖZ

English Lecturer,  
School of Foreign Languages,  
Namık Kemal University,  
(Tekirdağ)

### Abstract:

The aim of this study is provide the readers of postcolonial authors with evidence as regards the views of Ondaatje and Naipaul on national and cultural identities by means of comparing Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, which are accepted as among the most noteworthy literary works in the postcolonial domain. The common point between Ondaatje and Naipaul is that both of them do not live in their native land, but in a Western country. Likewise, the principally shared concern between these two works is that the main characters cannot attain any sense of securely belonging to any certain nation and culture since these authors do not consider that identities proceed within firmly depicted perimeters with clarity and consistency. According to Ondaatje and Naipaul, national or cultural identities often display their shifting and anxious conducts as the characters move from one place to another.

### Keywords: Ondaatje, Naipaul, belonging, dislocation.

The postcolonial period incorporates such unsettled issues as formation of cultures and identities and to what extent entire decolonization can be achieved not only in the political area but also in the cultural and psychological aspects of the colonized societies. Since the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, discussions on whether identities and cultural properties are fixed and stable or protean and unsettled have been in progress ardently without any unanimity. One of the focal points in postcolonialism is concerned with the prospect of annihilating the morbid heritage of colonialism out of each sphere and constitution in the native land and population. Scholars proposing some sorts of theoretical perceptions as regards the structural features of cultures and identities seem to unfold antithetical views concerning the truth of an obvious existence of boundaries between nations and also between individuals of dissimilar populations. The basic argument of scholars is generally concerned with whether cultural and national identities can achieve in preserving their natural ties with their original identities by adhering firmly to certain essentialist standards or not.

As a critic arguing that there exist manifest distinctions and typical characteristics between nations according to the Western discourses, Said attributes to this issue as follows: "It went to the bottom of things, it asserted that there was no escape from origins and the types these origins enabled; it set the real boundaries between human beings, on which races, nations, and civilizations were constructed ..." (233). As a result of close contacts between the Eastern and the Western nations throughout the history, rigid and immobile patterns which have to do with the features of these nations began to be accepted, and thus being manipulated as a kind of rationalization for protracting the colonialist attempts (Loomba 54). Thus, these patterns or stereotypes referring to the supremacy of Europeans and lesser standards of non-Europeans corroborate the clear-cut edges between those nations which cannot be converged in any condition. Whatever the Eastern nations perform on behalf of exceeding their poor standards in the eyes of Europeans, they are unable to dislocate their lesser patterns since they often fail to recall inflexibility and immutability of those images whose borders have already been established.

The opposing view, however, involves the idea that cultures do not assume any precise and easily distinguishable attributes which attest to their authentic and unmixed peculiarity as Bhabha makes it clear that if it is discerned that cultural elements and premises are anchored in a “contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation”, then the fact that cultures operate as inherently pure and original will be believed to be unsustainable (37). With regard to the notion that identities and cultures never take up any rudimentary and distinctive center which sets up their frontiers, it is asserted that “identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (Hall & Gay 4). Then, cultural identities cannot be considered as separate from the process of renewing and remolding themselves owing to their interactive bonds with other cultures and dynamics, but this renewal and floating appear to be neither entirely independent of their previous structural elements nor entirely dependent upon them.

Although there can be some dissimilarities in the works of Ondaatje and Naipaul, it can be said that the basic theoretical approach of both authors to the subject matters of cultures and identities uncovers nearly the same attitudes in that they often deal with fluidity and flexibility of the characters’ identities in their fiction. This is not so astonishing when it is recognized that both Ondaatje and Naipaul have lived in the Western countries far away from their native land and cultural roots, which most probably has a remarkable impact on the constitution of their views on cultural identities. Regarding the existence of blurred frontiers which discredit the idea of sharply drawn lines between nations and societies in Ondaatje’s fiction, Marinkova argues that “Ondaatje’s works contest the violence of both dominant and oppositional monologic discourses” (27). Thus, “spaces” in his writings are revealed as diversity and manifold proceedings, and come into existence as tracks of remaining in existence with “Others”, rather than as acknowledged entities or immutable grounding against which actions occur (Chiu 184). The reason why most of his works touch upon the issues of personal and national identities, immigrants, hybrid and displaced characters who have come about owing to the globalized world is most probably that he has immigrated to Canada (Zepetnek 1). In the same way, Naipaul does not believe that the nations of the Western world and the Eastern territories occupy totally disconnected spheres in which human beings act in compliance with predetermined essentials and roles, so the characters in his novels, like himself, can be best identified with being in a position of non-belonging, placeless and rootless (Singh 4). One of the most critical features of Naipaul is that, as King puts it, “He is part of a generation that had to face the problems and confusions that resulted from the withdrawal of imperial order” (3).

In *The English Patient*, Almasi is a Hungarian character whose identity cannot be understood throughout the long discussions and guesses made by the other characters around him and also the reader, being thought to be an English for a while; therefore, this ambiguity can act as substantial evidence concerning imprecision of demarcating and categorizing individuals with reference to certain essentialist norms given that Almasi does not possess any marked physical and cultural features which disclose his specific nation (Zepetnek 43). As Marinkova argues it, “That the patient is a charred black body ... suggests that the difference between the ‘white nations’ and the ‘brown faces’ is more complicated than the racialized binaries of imperial center vs. colony, or European vs. non-European” (122). Being really a Western citizen who is supposed to have a white skin, he is submitted as a person whose body is black on account of being burnt after the plane crash, which signifies that identities cannot be generalized through binary oppositions such as savage and modern, white and black, the West and the East. The author attempts to disprove the idea that there exist no unequivocal attributes that are unique to some identities being considered as indispensable

parts of certain nations. Even though language can be assumed as one of the hallmarks unfolding a person's nation, the fact that the English patient is able to communicate in a variety of languages such as English, German and the Bedouins' vernacular confirms and raises the complexity and uncertainty of predicting his absolute nation (Zepetnek 40, 41). Being able to speak more than one language in his dialogues by surpassing the "linguistic barriers", the English patient, Almásy, indicates unavoidability of questioning if languages can work out efficiently in ascertaining nationalities and identities (Zepetnek 41). If it is believed that a language is an indicator of a certain nation and society, then which nationality and place do those who are able to speak one more language belong to? Thus, Ondaatje wants to underline the impossibility of associating people with certain national and cultural identities as they bear out their existing not within the bounds of peculiar norms but within a vacuum in which these bounds are merged with each other.

In *The Mimic Men*, the main character Singh as a West Indian politician who attempts to obtain a steadfast and well-structured identity throughout the novel embodies Naipaul's theoretical views on wavering and fragmented identities and cultures which have come into view after the cultural clash between the European colonizers and the colonized nations. His Caribbean land, Isabella, poses a setting in which independence cannot reconstruct his purely native culture and identity because the Western civilization has already pervaded their indigenous cultural elements and given rise to an ambivalent intermingling of the cultural distinctiveness of the two totally dissimilar worlds. Intending to search for ease and comfort by means of writing his memoirs and psychological impasse as a sort of healing for his individual dilemma, Singh makes a statement as follows: "It was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples ..." (Naipaul 32). Thus, King argues that "The only order that is that given to the chaos of individual lives by writing about them, by creating narratives" (76). Not feeling any static emotion of belonging to anywhere including his own ancestors' society, Singh attributes to his anxiety springing from the state of being originally a West Indian in a different and extraneous land like Caribbean Isabella which was once immensely under the British colonialism in the previous times, and this anxiety culminates in certainly distorted and vague cultural identities. Consequently, what Naipaul lays emphasis on in the novel is that cultures and identities cannot be claimed to exist as fixed and established entities whose consistency has to be questioned especially after the Western civilization has filtered through the native cultures of the ex-colonized nations.

In conveying the idea that members of a certain nation cannot represent their cultural identities in a secure and steady manner, Ondaatje invents an image of the "desert" that "is composed of assemblages of multiple forces, forces that evade the Orientalist's desire to totalize the desert space into an empty zone for demarcation and division" (Chiu 129). The desert becomes the place where Almásy passes through a stage in which his national identity is transformed into a disintegrated sphere that is exhibited as a remark of floating nations and identities. Concerning the structure of the desert in the novel, it can be discerned that even including such an image in *The English Patient* is not inadvertent in that the desert does not display any distinctive and precise pattern owing to its sands frequently altering like "ocean waves" (Chiu 129). The surface of the desert reveals such a vacillating vision that it cannot sustain its current structure which always takes on different forms in line with weather conditions and heavy storms. Sands in the desert are carried and left wherever storms transfer them and can construct small or enormous hills there until a new strong storm takes them to somewhere. As time elapses, the "desert winds" dissociate all remnants of the earlier periods of humankind from the rooted identities of nations and their members, who pertain to a



precise era, a precise territory, a precise population (Provencal 147, 148). For this reason, these winds set nations and their citizens' identities in a gap in which they are deprived of their core essentials which make them distinctive and marked, including historical facts being an essential part of their identities. As for the identity of the English patient, the author puts across the implication that this character almost moves away entirely from his original Hungarian identity as soon as he spends certain time in the desert (Zepetnek 43). For instance, Ondaatje touches upon this subject matter by mentioning Almasi's articulation that "after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not belong to anyone, to any nation" (139). Moreover, the writer imparts the notion that Almasi and the other Western citizens with him leave behind their awareness of national identities while they spend time in the desert, underscoring Almasi's view that "All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries ... Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert." (139). The well-defined division between the Western nations and the Eastern ones is altered into ambiguous space in which Almasi is dragged into an identity crisis through his presence in the desert and his close relationship with the Bedouins tribe being a part of the desert. The Bedouins tribe is a nomadic group which does not have any fixed setting that they can be identified with, constantly remaining beyond any clear identification (Zepetnek 39). Just as this homeless tribe drifting from one place to another does not possess any complete and durable identity and the sense of belonging, so do those like Almasi disclose no proper and established self due to spending time in different territories that manifest completely diverse and irrelevant attributes being peculiar to their own spirit. In order to propose this perception, Ondaatje makes clear that discovering and having intimate contacts with this kind of tribes in the desert casts doubt upon Almasi's earlier alleged attachment to his national identity of the Western line as he pronounces that "There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I've met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, African – all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless." (138). As Smyrl discusses it, "Blurring the 'rivers of desert tribes' with the landscape itself, the English patient constructs a rhetorical experience of difference and erasure that forms the basis of his self-construction" (11). In addition to challenging the English patient's language by pointing out its vanity and fixing a void unto his body, the Bedouins reverse the role of the colonized and the colonizer by way of availing themselves of his expertise and information, thus subverting the domineering standing of the colonial nations (Zepetnek 40). And Ondaatje denotes it as follows: "For some he draws maps that go beyond their own boundaries and for other tribes too he explains the mechanics of guns" (22). As a citizen belonging to one of the Western nations that are often equated with colonizing and dominating the Oriental nations, Almasi is now assimilated into a subservient person on whom such assignments as informing the tribes about geographical regions and how to use weapons are incumbent. After the plane crash and being stranded in the desert, he is also surrounded and rescued by them as a helpless person rather than as an assertive and self-confident man. The tribes in some sense affirm the perception that they are able to perform a commanding role and domination over a Western citizen like Almasi without any technological devices and modern equipment. This reversal of the roles ascribed to the Western and Oriental nations verifies Ondaatje's negation of the predetermined patterns that are manipulated as a means of generating irrevocable stereotypes within irreversibly drawn lines between these stereotypes.

In *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul also falls back on some images as a marker of fluidity and alterability of identities that arise as a result of interactive association between discrete nations; for instance, the image of "shipwreck" is used several times in the novel so as to stand for Singh's fragmentation and anxiety becoming visible due to the fleeting and ephemeral trait of his identity, especially during his journeys between London and Isabella.

The writer deliberately turns to the image of “shipwreck” in order to insinuate Singh’s sense of displacement and disorder in this fashion:

Shipwreck: I have used this word before. With my island background, it was the word that always came to me. And this was what I felt I had encountered again in the great city: this feeling of being adrift, a cell of perception, little more, that might be altered, if only fleetingly, by any encounter. (27)

The shipwreck can be evidently identified with the mental state of Singh since the wreck is not utterly owned by the ship, and also it partly belongs to the ship because it is an inseparable part of the ship before the ship tears apart. Then, the shipwreck has to endure this ambiguity in an irretrievable manner just like the ones that are often exposed to wholly disparate cultures or nations and inevitably feel dislocated, confused and isolated throughout their lives. “It takes him only a few months in London, his fantasy city, to realize that there is a great disorder here and a more shipwreck of lives” (Mishra 163). In the novel, the author makes references to the loss and fluctuation of Singh’s identity in his first stay in London like this: “Those of us who came to it lost some of our solidity; we were trapped into fixed, flat postures ... everyone reduced, reciprocally, to a succession of such meetings, so that first experience and then the personality divided bewilderingly into compartments” (27). Aiming to elude his huge unrest in Isabella and get a university education, he moves to London with great hopes in order to explore his purely primary self; nevertheless, he gets frustrated by an obscure territory in which his disintegrated self deepens rather than vanishing. Singh emphasizes his frustration and bewilderment by mentioning that “So quickly had London gone sour on me. The great city, centre of the world, in which, fleeting disorder, I had hoped to find the beginning of order” (18). As an appealing and prosperous metropolis which Singh thinks can offer a new promising route to his identity predicament, London holds his interest since the colonialist nations have succeeded in imposing the supremacy of each aspect of the Western world on the colonized societies. This presentation of the Western civilization and culture firstly promises new and fulfilling prospects on the surface for the citizens of the once colonized countries, but its allure conversely hauls those citizens into the depths of a so-called superior and different world, locating them in a sort of disorder and uncertainty and thus nullifying the standing barriers between the Western and Oriental nations. By displaying the ambiguity of Singh’s first stay, particularly his educational period, in England regarding where and how he can adjust himself to the unknown setting, Naipaul brings up the principal predicament of this main character (Mustafa 101). After leaving London with frustration and impasse in order to return back to his supposed native roots in Isabella, Singh articulates his first impressions he gets as soon as he arrives there in the following way: “This tainted island is not for me. I decided years ago that this landscape was not mine. Let us move on. Let us stay on the ship and be taken somewhere else” (Naipaul 51). Implying Singh’s incoherent and blurred identity whose fluidity is intensified during his stay in London, Naipaul draws attention to Singh’s feelings right after his arrival in Isabella: “We celebrated our unexpected freedom; we celebrated the island and our knowledge, already growing ambiguous, of the world beyond; we celebrated our cosmopolitanism, which had more meaning here than it ever had in the halls of the British Council” (56). In spite of feeling dislocated and confused in London, Singh now thinks that his cosmopolitan side becomes meaningful and effectual while being in Isabella for he has abandoned half of his identity in London. Not embodying any heterogeneous society, cultural and traditional instruments and orderliness which can bring about consistency, Isabella’s past experiences of enslavement and the European hegemony have given rise to the severe opposition and the figurative avenging of the previous torments instead of the calm, logical assessment of what has to be performed within the existing and

accessible opportunities (King 72). In such a surrounding where he fails to be a flourishing politician, he is compelled to depart from Isabella as an exile to again London due to the fact that, as Mustafa mentions it, “The party of which he is co-founder is a nationalist, multi-ethnic, populist, and quasi-socialist organization which soon ousts him as its base becomes increasingly factionalized” (100). In returning to London again, but as an exile this time with his shifting cultural identity, Singh cannot find any resolution and static mood even though he strives to reach relief and permanence through his activity of writing memoirs as is stated by the author: “I no longer dream of ideal landscapes or seek to attach myself to them ... I no longer seek to find beauty in the lives of the mean and oppressed. Hate oppression; fear the oppressed” (Naipaul 10, 11). Singh’s feelings disclose his recognition of his vain attempts to locate himself in an ultimate territory which might smooth out his dilemma of dislocation resulting from the European nations’ oppressive acts on the colonized population in the past in that these policies and acts have paved the way for the quandary of the oppressed nations.

Last of all, Ondaatje and Naipaul can be said to share nearly the same notions regarding the formation and structure of national or cultural identities, putting on view these notions in their novels such as *The English Patient* and *The Mimic Men*. Almasy in *The English Patient* no longer adheres to his Hungarian or Western national essentials especially once he is stranded in the desert after the plane crash. Spending time in the Eastern desert and landscapes and having close ties with the tribes there, he does not really consider himself as a Hungarian citizen for his national identity is transformed into being confused and fragmented. Even his physical appearance and his ability to speak a number of languages cause other characters to reflect deeply on and try to estimate what his nationality is. Similarly, Singh in *The Mimic Men*, as a student firstly and then as a politician, comes to London several times, leaving his nominal Caribbean island of Isabella as originally an Indian person. He finds neither solidity nor any permanent identity in any landscape and remains as a character with disintegration and spiritual ruins. He exemplifies a typical ex-colonized citizen that frequently immigrates to other territories with the hope of searching for an unshakable mood for the reason that these once colonized people occupy an in-between position, always being unable to associate themselves with any static nation ultimately. Through their mentioned novels, both writers imply the fact that cultures and nations cannot preserve their essential elements and characteristics because they possess not any fixed and steady nature, but constantly changing and floating whenever their citizens or members have intimate connections with others, ending up with borderless and placeless individual worlds.

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