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Subverting Homogeneity of Identity and Knowledge in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

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Notion of monolithic identity and constructed knowledge has been incessantly problematised in postcolonial discourse. *The English Patient* is a quintessential critique of the binary of 'civilised-barbaric,' 'orient-occident,' and 'self-other.' A closer look at the multi-layered narrative of the novel offers an insight not only in the ambiguous identity of the four character narrators, but also in the subverted claims of disseminating 'pure' knowledge of the East in the West. Ondaatje's subtle commentary on the cultural and political milieu of the Second World War foregrounds hegemony of national identity and racial superiority that created psychological barriers across cultures and eventually led to a devastating war.

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is a saga of passionate love at the backdrop of World War II. The narrative is an intense amalgamation of multiple war experiences that also foreground psyche of the four central characters. Apparently, novel's focus is on the love story of the English Patient Almasy, but it also has strong undertones of postcolonial critique woven into its intricate fabric.

The novel is set in 1930s-40s and begins with the narration of English Patient's travails in North African desert. Ondaatje's postcolonial critique is evident in the skilful naming of the novel as *The English Patient* after the protagonist Almasy who is not English but Hungarian. This is a clever truce to make a mockery of the notion of national identity. Almasy proudly calls himself an "international bastard," since he has been affiliated with myriad nations and cultures (Ondaatje 188). Ondaatje has profusely employed symbols and motifs to negate national, cultural and racial identity of Almasy. Various denominators of individual identity such as race, culture, nationality, linguistic affiliations have all been made ambiguous in case of Almasy. In the beginning of the novel he is presented as a badly burnt black bodied creature who is going through partial amnesia and whose only identity is that he speaks English in British accent: "Everything about him was very English except for the fact that his skin was tarred black (Ondaatje 102)." Accordingly, his identity is constructed as the "English patient." Another very conspicuous factor of identity is the skin colour which is a central trope in the postcolonial discourse. Transformation of Almasy's white skin into black is a further proof that his creator knowingly wants him to be an epitome of a "schizoid" self (Bhabha "How Newness" 307).

Through his aberrant narrative Almasy reveals himself not only to Hana, Caravaggio and Kip, but also to his own self. Story telling is an endeavour to piece his scattered identity together, but even his story telling is as ambiguous as his physical identity. His initial narrative represents Almasy in third person, as if it were a different person he is referring to. In the later narrative he

acknowledges himself as Almasy and there is a marked difference in the narrative. The latter narrative is more intense, passionate, intuitive and personal than the first one, though slightly less credible especially the portion that relates Katharine's demonic possession at the time of her death. Almasy's claim of being an "Anubis" figure to carry the soul to after-life adds another dimension to his dubious personality, as it also suggests ephemeral status of his existence as a burnt patient who is stuck between life and death but who brings psychologically dead figures of Hana, Caravaggio and Kip back to life (Haswell and Edwards 7).

Almasy, however, is not the only one who carries schizoid identity, the other three character narrators i.e. Hana, Caravaggio and Kip also challenge conventional notions of national identity, as all of them have migrated from the country of their origin to work in alien lands. In the process of acclimatisation their personalities have taken shape of culture hybrids. Out of the four character narrators, it is Kirpal Singh or Kip whose case seems to be most curious, since his political, cultural, religious, and ethnic affiliations are drastically different from the other three. Kip is an Indian Sikh who is transported to England during World War II and is recruited "into a unit of engineers that had been set up to deal with delayed action and unexploded bombs (Ondaatje 194)." Ondaatje has given an extensive account of Kip's process of acclimatisation which began way before he set his foot in England. Kip's training as a "mimic man" begins from the time he receives English education in British India and is given lessons in the cultural superiority and magnanimity of the English race (Bhabha "Of Mimicry" 128). At the hour of his disillusionment i.e. the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he rants his anger in front of the English patient while acknowledging his life-long struggle for becoming a *pukkah*:

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. You stood for precise behaviour. 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 301)

Kip's anger towards the Western world is confusedly directed towards Almasy, whom he considers representative of 'the West' that bombed 'the East.' When Caravaggio tries to clear the confusion by pointing out that Almasy "isn't an Englishman," Kip retorts by saying, "American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman (Ondaatje 304)." At this point in the novel Kip seems to be a quintessential case of a "flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English (Bhabha "Of Mimicry" 128)."

Kip's faith in the superiority of the English race also makes him a little diffident about his own self, which is evident through his coy behaviour in London. In his three months stay in London he "had met only other Indians and English officers" and "most of his time had been spent in barracks at Woolwich (Ondaatje 194)." It is the mentorship of Lord Suffolk that gives a new confidence to Kip and he acknowledges that Lord Suffolk "was the first real gentleman he

had met in England (Ondaatje 198).” Kip readily becomes a part of the Trinity of Prof Suffolk, Miss Morden and Mr Harts and “stepped into a family, after a year abroad (Ondaatje 201).” In the comforting care of this new family Kip’s faith in the magnanimity of the English people is reaffirmed and he makes it a point to prove himself worthy of Lord Suffolk’s unflinching faith placed in him: “I trust you, Mr Singh, . . . You know I trust you to do as well as I (Ondaatje 198).”

Kip’s acclimatisation in an alien land is facilitated by the quintessential ‘English gentleman’ Lord Suffolk and his kind and compassionate secretary Miss Morden, “the first English woman he had really spoken with since he arrived in England (Ondaatje 194).” But the process is broken midway by the accidental death of Lord Suffolk, Miss Morden and Mr Harts in May 1941. Kip finds himself once again lonely and alienated and goes through an intense emotional turmoil. He, however, determines to take Lord Suffolk’s legacy forward and succeeds in dismantling the new kind of bomb that killed Lord Suffolk in Erith. As a token of gratitude towards Lord Suffolk, Kip charts a blue print of the whole ZUS-40 problem and writes at the bottom: *“Drawn by desire of Lord Suffolk, by his student Lieutenant Kirpal Singh, 10 May 1941*(Ondaatje 211).

Lord Suffolk’s trinity, however, serves as a foil to accentuate discriminatory behaviour of other English people around Kip, who simply ignore him or refuse to acknowledge his existence. While diffusing the fatal bomb in Erith, he is intrigued by the dubious behaviour of the English soldiers:

He knew he was for now a king, a puppet master, could order anything, a bucket of sand, a fruit pie for his needs, and those men who would not cross an uncrowded bar to speak with him when they were off duty would do what he desired. . . . He was accustomed to his invisibility. In England he was ignored in the various barracks and he came to prefer that. (Ondaatje 209)

He makes peace with the fact that he is “the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world (Ondaatje 209).” Nevertheless, every now and then he comes across few exceptions like an odd Mr Hardy who incessantly addresses him as ‘Sir’ in spite of being ten years older to him: “There was always hesitation by the soldiers to call him ‘sir,’ but Hardy barked it out loud and enthusiastically (Ondaatje 225).”

During his stay in Villa San Girolamo, his strange habits become centre of attraction for other inmates, who take some time to get accustomed to it. Caravaggio, particularly, finds it difficult to come to terms with Kip’s food habits:

At lunch there is Caravaggio’s avuncular glance at the objects on the blue handkerchief. There is probably some rare animal, Caravaggio thinks, who eats the same foods that this young soldier eats with his right hand, his fingers

carrying it to his mouth. He uses the knife only to peel the skin from the onion, to slice fruit. (Ondaatje 93)

It is not just the food habit which does not strike a chord with others, but also Kip's peculiar sense of sanitation. He washes his hands with water many times a day, and brushes his teeth for ten minutes wandering round in the open. If on one hand Kip's singularities perplex Caravaggio, on the other it amuses Hana, who finds an exotic charm in Kip's personality. For Hana, Kip's brown body was "the brownness of a rock, the brownness of a muddy storm-fed river (Ondaatje 111)." Hana is equally enticed by Kip's tale of his native place Lahore, his Sikh religion, the exploits of warrior saints and the antiquity of Indian culture (Ondaatje 221). But looking through Edward Said's notion of Orientalism, both Caravaggio and Hana's approach towards Kip would be considered orientalist perspective: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences (1)." Hana and Caravaggio's approach towards Kip clearly falls into the diametrically opposite stereotype of either divinely good or diabolically bad. It is these sweeping generalisations of the East that create a myth of homogeneity in the mind of the West. The illusion of harmonious co-existence in Villa San Girolamo proves short lived, as the gulf of East and West gets widened in the aftermath of Hiroshima, Nagasaki nuclear explosion. Kip immediately identifies himself with the East and vouchsafes the cause of the entire Eastern World by confronting the English patient. The conceptual edifice of multicultural cohesion develops cracks and the discourse of homogeneity is dismantled at the core.

It is this discourse of homogeneity that Edward Said attacks in *Orientalism*. Said foregrounds the fissure in the corpus of academic knowledge produced by the West about the East. He asserts that "an Englishman in India or Egypt in the later nineteenth century took an interest in those countries that was never far from their status in his mind as British colonies. To say this may seem quite different from saying that all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact—and yet that is what I am saying in this study of Orientalism (Said 11)." Desert explorations carried on by Almasy, Madox, Bell and others is supposedly a purely academic pursuit. But during World War II, this pure knowledge turns into political. Geoffrey Clifton, who joins Almasy in Cairo, turns out to be a British spy who passes vital information regarding secret routes in North African desert to the British Intelligence Agency. Almasy, though initially on a purely academic pursuit, barterers his knowledge with the Germans to get back to Katherine in Cave of Swimmers. The entire research activity carried on by the explorers in the Libyan deserts is exploited by both the Germans and Allied forces for their vested political interest in World War II, thus reaffirming Said's claim that the academic interest of the West in the East expresses "a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world (12)."

Thus Ondaatje's multi-layered narrative in *The English Patient* skilfully offers a subtle critique of Western notions of supremacy and centrality by problematising notion of national identity and claims of pure knowledge.

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