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“We are the real countries. Not the boundaries drawn on maps”: A Study of Ondaatje's *The English Patient* as well as the film adaptation of it by Anthony Minghella

Pradip Mondal

Abstract:

Nationality and identity—these tug-of-war issues are inextricably interconnected in Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* (1992) and Anthony Minghella's adapted film version, both of which are set in World War II Italy. These create a web of inescapable structures that tie the characters to certain places and time despite their best efforts to break free of the confinement. Questions concerning the identity of the English patient Almsy form one of the narrative threads and lend the novel a sense of mystery. Almsy forges his identity through his character, his deed and his interaction with others. Rather than inheriting the identity, Almsy creates an alternative identity in the desert.

The film *The English Patient* (1996) opens with a pre-war biplane flying above a vast desert, carrying two passengers in its cockpit. The image of the desert is a crucial and recurrent motif in the movie. Opposing to nationalism and nation-state realities, the desert subverts the colonial practices such as mapping and locating. Through the villa as a microcosm, Ondaatje seems to communicate the idea of a form of global belonging. But, the movie somewhere fails to suggest the war-ravaged Italian villa as a space without borders. Here, we find the villa merely as a site of complete destruction. The present paper is going to show how different identities and roles of the characters determine the movements and actions of the characters in tumultuous WWII period both in the novel and the adapted movie version.

Keywords:

Nationality, confinement, identity, nation-state, mapping, belonging, space

In Michael Ondaatje's Booker Prize-winning novel *The English Patient* (1992), questions concerning the identity of the English patient form one of the core narrative threads and lend the novel a sense of mystery and suspense. This mystery may also be seen as elemental to the post- World War II period as millions of people in Europe had their identities erased and others made dubious claims not to be guilty of war crimes or espionage. Ondaatje turns the romance into an improbable mystery, gradually revealing hidden facets of character and identity as the novel unfolds. Ondaatje explores his characters by placing them in bare, insulated settings, enabling the author to probe his characters intensely.

The novel is so labyrinthine that it is a miracle it was adapted into a film. The British director Anthony Minghella has done a creative as well as remarkable job in his film *The English Patient* (released in 1996) of finding visual ways to show how the rich language slowly unveils layers of the past. The movie orbits around layers of mystery

until all the knots of the enigmas in the story are disentangled, and only the great sore of a doomed love remains in the end.

In the novel there is a special attention to the description of this space, pointing out that the borders that once separated one room from another do not function anymore, showing that this space defies the constructed demarcation of the outside world. Even the inside is not completely delimited from the outside: “seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remains of the earth” (Ondaatje 1992: 45). Visualization is a staple feature of any film. This film is also no exception. The film focuses on the visual image of the desert. The movie starts with a moving shot of this vast space from the plane. It appears like an unmappable, eroticized shot of the smooth flesh-like desert. In the movie the suggestion about the Italian villa is not very clear. Here the villa rather points out a state of complete destruction rather than a space devoid of borders and limits.

What we find in the film version is that the adulterous relationship between the Hungarian cartographer Count Laszlo de Almasy (elsewhere referred to as the eponymous ‘English Patient’) and a British married woman Katharine transgresses marital and national constraints. On the other hand, Hana’s relationship with Kip hints at the transnational way of loving. Nations are “imaginary communities”, to borrow the oft-quoted phrase of the famous political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson, propounded in his famous book *Imagined Communities* (1983). He asserts that nationalism is based on the very concept of a unified imaginary community. Furthermore, nations also provide people with a sense of inclusion, connectedness and identity through a collective territory which they believe they geographically belong to. Therefore the people of a particular country harbor the notion that they have the right to separate themselves from other peoples’ land by means of borders. Still the English patient refuses to imagine himself as part of a community, or a nation, because he does not see the value of it in the same way as he values the desert. Whereas the desert accepts a person for who he or she is, irrespective of nationality, a nation circumscribes a person to a certain area.

Set in the Villa San Girolamo in the Italian countryside, this ‘expatriate’ narrative is about four characters trying to eke out a living in the aftermath of the Second World War (1939-45). The story is centred on the enigma of the English patient whose identity is unknown. Almasy (played by Ralph Fiennes) manages to represent both England and Hungary, while at the same time being nationless. Hana, a Canadian nurse, stays with him in the villa after he has been left behind by the Allies since he is too weak to move. They are joined by Caravaggio, a Canadian-Italian thief and spy for the Allies and an old friend of Hana’s father, and Kip—an Indian Sikh who is a sapper in the British army. They all come from different places with different national backgrounds. They all have the wounds of war to recuperate from, but together they interact and form compassionate relations similar to those of a family. The relative idyll of the villa is, however, towards the end shattered by the atomic bombings in the Japanese towns Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The ruined villa may connote the dilapidated European civilization. Like the villa, Almasy’s body is a ruin implying a loss which can never be healed. It is a loss of the self where his only point of reference is a copy of *The Histories* by the famous ancient Greek historian Herodotus which he has kept with him all the time. This book provides him with much required mental solace from boredom and alienation. The book comes

to represent his identity as he has continuously modified it by gluing in scraps of newspapers and other bits of information he has found relevant during his explorations. Thus, he has projected his sense of the self and his worldview into the book.

In the movie, we see Madox—Almasy's best friend in the desert, asking Almasy, "We didn't care about countries, did we? Brits, Arabs, Hungarians, Germans—None of that mattered, did it?" Almasy agrees to that. When Carravagio informs the ailing Almasy that his one-time partner Madox shot himself to death after finding out that Almasy was a spy, Almasy denies his allegation. The film makes use of many flashbacks of Almasy and Caravaggio. The entire film can be seen as a process of instilling Almasy's traumatic experiences (which at first he even cannot call up) into Hana's memory—and into the memory of the viewers as well.

The noted critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha, in his influential essay, "DissemiNation: time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation" (1990) argues that nationalist representations are unstable and fragile constructions, for they cannot produce the sense of national unity to forge a collective national consciousness due to the ambivalence of national discourse. Nation as a notion is very much fluid. Nations are constructed and re-constructed continuously by national subjects. In other words, the nation is never fixed, it is split within itself: "It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*" (Bhabha 1990: 297).

To Almasy, the desert is not only a place or a backdrop for action, it is an entity with qualities and characteristics all its own. It has tremendous power not only to erase identity, but to transcend time and place: "In the desert it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation" (Ondaatje 1992: 20). Open, barren, and empty, the blank geography of the desert highlights the futility of war among nations. In the desert, Almasy notes, "all of us...wished to remove the clothing of our countries". Living in the desert helps Almasy to realize this, and thus shapes his own *weltanschauung*. Here in the desert, all the identities get merged. The patient himself says that he is English, but there are no papers or documents that can verify his claim except his English accent, habits, mannerisms, and his knowledge of Britain. Furthermore, due to the loss of memory, either self-imposed or actual amnesia, the patient cannot even call up his name, which further complicates the process of identification.

The patient's sense of belonging, though, is not tied to a particular nation, but rather to this desert where he has lived as an explorer and cartographer, mapping uncharted lands. The desert, then, becomes a place for the patient where he can easily 'slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, any nation' (Ondaatje 1992: 148). He has become anonymous like the desert itself and has been able to travel without ever belonging to 'any nation' in the true sense. But when the war invades the desert, one has to be sagacious. It becomes crucial to belong to the right nation, to be on the right side, depending on what army one would encounter.

The titular character of the novel, Almasy exists as the centre and focus of the action, despite the fact that he is without any identity for much of the narrative of the novel. Almasy thus serves as the *carte blanche* on which all the other characters write their desires and expectations. Bit by bit, he reveals his identity, and finally his name, in

Chapter IX. When Almasy's name is revealed, the readers discover the great irony of the novel: the English patient is not even English, but rather Hungarian by birth, an "international bastard" who has spent much of his adult life wandering in the Lybian desert. Almasy learns a lot about exigency dwelling in the periphery, where the confrontation with strong alien force springs back upon him in unpredictable ways. To Almasy who places no face-value in the concept of nations and states that it is not at all unethical to help a German spy through the desert. Ultimately, however he suffers greatly for his deep-rooted beliefs and for his moments of emotional outbursts.

The desert and the isolated Italian villa function as such places where national identity is insignificant to one's connection with others. Both offer utopian possibilities. The sapper Kip, who becomes enmeshed in the idea of the Western society and the welcoming community of the inhabitants of the villa, even dismisses his hyperawareness of his own racial identity for a time. Though he is born of a different nation (i.e., India)—albeit part of the British Empire—Kip finds a nation to which he attaches himself both in nature and in action. Such an understanding of Kip's connection to a nation sheds light on the English patient's connection to his own nation, i.e., the Lybian desert. Of all the characters in the novel, the one who has the most adequate reason to feel like an outsider is the sapper, Kirpal Singh. Actually, the movie omits some of the engaging issues, including the attempts of Kip aka Kirphal, to rememorize his past in London and his experience as the "other". Even the fact that he is called Kip suggests his hybrid identity: he is seen as an exotic "product" of the British Empire, who serves in the army for the Allies despite the animosity of his family. Through Kip, Ondaatje comes close to writing about the experience of the ethnic other. Kip's ethnic origin, his Indian identity, is conspicuous. Through him Ondaatje raises issues of race and racial prejudice in a predominantly Western culture.

When Almasy walks from the "Cave of Swimmers" to El Taj to fetch help for the injured Katharine, British soldiers detain him as a German spy, and Katharine dies alone in a pathetic way. Afterwards, as he is flying her body back to civilization, German machine gunners shoot down his British plane. The lovers, it seems, could only have been united on the "earth without maps" that Katharine imagines in her dying moments. We find in the film that before her death, she writes on the copy of Herodotus's *The Histories* (440 BCE): "We are the real countries. Not the boundaries drawn on maps". This observation encapsulates the whole affair between Almasy and Mrs Clifton as well as one of the main messages of this film.

All the characters in this novel are dislocated and displaced from their origins. They are war-damaged wanderers, twentieth-century avatars of Ulysses. The noted scholar and critic Josef Pesch argues that Ondaatje creates a "post-apocalyptic" world through this novel. At the time the novel takes place, in 1945, which Hana calls "a period of adjustment", each one of them seems more comfortable without home, without possessions, and without traditional kinds of attachments. She takes refuge in the ruined villa and feels safe amidst devastation. Freedom for her means days without clocked or calendrical time—without rules, without limits. This state is reflected in the landscape that she has chosen to inhabit. It is with a mixed sense of having survived a traumatic event, as well as an awareness of imminent danger in her semi-enclosed space, that she goes about performing her daily chores. The liminal mode of living mirrors her preference for existence without structures or borders.

For Almasy—the so-called English patient, national boundaries are immaterial. As part of the Geographical Society, the explorers like Almasy and Madox reconceive of themselves in ways other than through their national identities. Almasy emphatically asserts: “Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert” (Ondaatje 1992: 148). He hates the parochiality of nationality. He begins ‘to hate nations’ because, in his opinion, nation-states undo mankind by declaring war on each other. He describes the experience of him and his friend Madox with the Bedouin in the early 1930s: “We were German, English, Hungarian, African—all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless” (Ondaatje 1992: 147).

In a gesture that is reminiscent of the act of compassion and love performed by Hana and the Bedouin, Kip shares his precious condensed milk with the English patient. Hana sees “Kip and the English patient passing a can of condensed milk back and forth. The Englishman sucks at the can, then moves the tin away from his face to chew the thick fluid” (Ondaatje 1992: 188). Symbolically, it is the sharing of sweetened milk that brings to mind their similar state of dislocation and despair. Just as condensed milk has become a kind of international food, so they share an existence in a kind of borderless, nation-less state.

Such are the ways in which the novel and film both attempt to enact and represent a series of post-national, borderless societies. By portraying an existence outside traditional forms of family, class, and nation; by depicting scenes of communion between strangers; by revealing human kindness which transcends boundaries of complexion, Ondaatje suggests that alternative kinds of social structures are also possible. Rather than exoticizing the racial ‘Others’, the text projects the exotic onto the landscape. The desert, the villa in Tuscany, even the contours of one’s body, becomes the exotic, unfamiliar territory.

At the terminal point of the war, “Englishman” no longer seems to refer to nationality. It does indeed not matter anymore whether the English patient is English. The English patient’s rallying cry “Erase the family name! Erase nations!” (Ondaatje 1992: 139) has been echoed throughout the novel. In our present times, the notion of nationality has been sidelined: “In post-apocalyptic times, questions of nationality have become secondary, contaminated; another concept of nineteenth-century stability is shattered in the onslaught of twentieth-century reality” (Pesch 1997: 124). The characters try to find a new home for themselves far away from their home countries. The English patient hates the idea of home and nation. To Almasy, the desert is his final destination, where nationality becomes completely irrelevant, where he can entirely lose his identity, and where he does not belong to any specific nation. It is the desert, where he can finally accomplish his dream of building his own utopia devoid of the shadow of nationality and identity. Moreover, his “nationless” stance is further insinuated as he believes that helping a German spy across the desert is not an act of betrayal at all.

Through the villa as a microcosm, Ondaatje seems to communicate the idea of a form of global belonging. The novel and the film seem universal in their theme but local in setting. The novel and the film nicely capture the post-war Italy. The characters’ desire and ability to form new home in the devastated Italian Villa is notable. Here they develop a new sense of belonging that transcends their former love for their own countries. A man’s sense of belonging and loyalty can change with the changing

circumstances in the war-torn world. Interestingly, the theme of belonging can also be related to Ondaatje's own life. Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka, and then moved to England with his mother due to the separation of his parents. After having returned to Sri Lanka briefly, ultimately he shifted to Canada where he now permanently lives. This biographical information of the novelist adds a fresh dimension to the protagonist Almasy's odyssey as an expatriate. Ondaatje rejected the industrial West in favor of the expatriate life and made that quest the subject of this novel. So his sense of belonging constantly changed with his shifting to different countries.

The characters' sense of belonging may also be represented in the idea of a global community. Perhaps the most extreme form of nationalism in the film is carried out, ironically, by members of the International Sand Club, a group of desert explorers with ties to the Royal Geographic Society of Britain. In the movie, we find that during the farewell dinner at International Sand Club, Almasy addresses a moving speech to the members, including Mrs Clifton. Soon after, he says that he must not say "International" as it is a 'dirty' and 'filthy' word. He uses three different languages — the English expression "His Majesty", the German expression "Die Fuhrer" and the Italian expression "Il Duce"—all meaning 'the Chief'. In this way, he wishes to dismiss the supremacy of any particular language or nation. Almasy hates his job as a cartographer and tries to go beyond the notion of 'nation'. The noted critic Papayanis observes in her well-known book *Writing in the Margins: The Ethics of Expatriation from Lawrence to Ondaatje* (2005) that Almasy "not only renounces his profession of mapmaking, he comes to embrace an ethos of radical communality. Paradoxically, it is his spirit alone that is able to transcend the positionality that disperses the postmodern generation of expatriates..." (Papayanis 2005: 35).

Austrian social democrat Otto Bauer in his seminal essay "The Nation" (1924) observes that "The nation for us is thus no longer a rigid thing, but a process of becoming, whose nature is governed by the conditions under which people struggle for their necessities of life and to maintain themselves" (qtd. in Balakrishnan 1996: 56). We find the eagerness of the characters, especially, Almasy and Kip, to erase their own respective identities in order to survive in a war-torn territory. Their ideal notion of identity is based on personality and individuality rather than race and religion. No matter how rigorously one strives to escape from the nets of nationality, he or she will eventually realize that his or her demand cannot be fulfilled forever

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BIO-NOTE

Pradip Mondal completed his Master's degree in English Literature with American Literature as Special Paper from Visva-Bharati, West Bengal, in 2007. He was awarded with JRF by UGC in 2013. Currently, he is wrapping up his Ph. D from Visva-Bharati. His areas of interest include Modern American Poetry, Postcolonial literature, Modern novel, literary theory and criticism. He has presented papers at two International Conferences and four National Seminars so far. He has published several articles in *Muse India* and other journals besides contributing Chapters to four edited books till date.

Email: pragmaticpradip@gmail.com