

**ABSTRUSE TRANSNATIONALISM: A STUDY OF MICHAEL  
ONDAATJE'S *THE ENGLISH PATIENT***

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The present paper is an attempt to explore the obscure, mysterious and profound idea of Transnationalism. *The English Patient* questions the idea of fixed identity for nations and suggests the need for transnational identities. It highlights identity as issue of multiple cultural origins and dispersed geographical locations. These geographical dispersions render identity heterogeneous and fragmented.

The novel lends credence to the idea that national identity can be erased. The desert and the isolated Italian Villa function as places where national identity is insignificant to one's connection with others. The Villa San Girolama, which used to be convent, had become the last stronghold of the German army and had housed nearly a hundred troops. The Allies turned the building into a hospital when they took over. The Italian Villa is the intersection point where the four individuals of different nationalities meet and share their past. Hana, Kip and Caravaggio are socially and culturally displaced. The Villa San Girolama becomes a metaphor for a space which exists outside geographical and temporal restrictions. It is a third space protected for the time being from war and the structures of power. This space or world shelters all the characters gathered there, who were victims of authority or the lines drawn on maps.

The characters in the novel lack a coherent cultural identity and evince a *plural notion of identity that belongs to different cultural spaces* [JICS 1.2, 2001:75]. The four different characters in the novel suggest the multiplicity of identities. The characters are indeed transnationals and extend the notion of Transnationalism.

*The English Patient* is presumably the famous geographer and explorer of Africa, the Hungarian Count Almasy. The expedition party consisted of four explorers – Prince Kemal el Dein, Bell, Almasy and Madox who focused on finding the ancient city of Zerzura, in the Gilf Kebir, a plateau in the Libyan Desert. A sort of supra-national unity is experienced by the Europeans drawn to the desert. The explorers were 'men of all nations' [EP, 141].

Almasy is Hungarian by birth but spent much of his adult life wandering the desert. He enumerates the abstraction of concepts such as nationality and citizenship. He attaches no value to the concept of nations and states. So it is not at all unethical for him to help a German spy through the desert. For him, national identity is completely irrelevant in the desert.

The desert taught the English Patient that names, nationalities, religions and races were insignificant:

*We were German, English Hungarian, African – all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states.*

[EP, 147]

The English Patient denies his origin, place and identity. He does not want “*to belong to any one, to any nation*”. [EP, 148] He opined that there should not be any barriers of boundaries. He visualizes that people of different nationalities should only be regarded as human beings. They should not be categorized on the basis of nation, race, color, or gender. The world should be such a place where co-existence of different people, religions, cultures and languages would be made possible. The English Patient’s disgust with the notion of nation comes to the fore when he says: “*All I desired was to work upon such an earth that had no maps*”. [EP, 277]

The English Patient’s desire is nothing but the reiteration of transnationlist assumption. The English Patient was a spy during the war. In order to escape the onslaught of dreadful war, he negates his identity by “*becoming nobody*”. [JCL 33.1, 1998:27]

Hana is a French-Canadian nurse whose father was killed in France. Caravaggio informs Hana that the English Patient feels at home in a desert: “*Some of the English love Africa. A part of their brain reflects the desert precisely. So they’re not foreigners there*”. [EP, 35] She also seems to be a nomadic self. She constantly moves about in the Italian Villa. Hana had been trained at Women’s College Hospital and then sent overseas during the Sicilian invasion in 1943. The First Canadian Infantry Division worked in Italy and the destroyed bodies were sent to the field hospitals. Everybody left the hospital which was abandoned during the war. However, unperturbed by the turn of events, Hana continue to live in the ruins of the villa and take care of the English patient. Hana had to work among the people of different nationalities: “*She was surrounded by foreign men. Not one pure Italian*”. [EP, 68] Hana was completely devoted to her service. She was so engaged in taking care of the English Patient that she forgot her own country: “*Where was and what was Toronto anymore in her mind?*” [EP, 52]

Hana wanted to save the English Patient, “*this nameless, almost faceless man?*” [EP, 54] She refuses to identify with herself as she “*removed all mirrors and stacked them away in an empty room*”. [EP, 25] Left in an alien territory, she tried to search her true self. Having no fixed identity, she goes into a self-imposed exile in the villa. Hana is the Canadian nurse who landed in Italy. She took care of the English patient there but she is not able to nurse her own father who was in Canada. Hana desired to go back to her home: “*I wanted to go home and there was no one at home. And I was sick of Europe.*” [EP, 90-91]

She was unable to transcend the border. In her letter to Clara, Hana expresses her grief and says: “*Do you understand the sadness of geography?*” [EP, 314] She says, “*I am sick of Europe, Clara. I want to come home*” [EP, 314]. It shows her desire for origins.

Kip also possess polytropic identities. Kip has moved from India to England. But he adjusted to the new surroundings and adapted British culture. Hana knows that he “*has grown up an outsider and so can switch allegiances, can replace loss.*” [EP, 289] Kip straddles two worlds, walking on a tight rope and finding it difficult to maintain a balance between adopting western customs and losing national identity.

He is a brown man in a white nation. Kip is sent on very dangerous and sensitive missions. Kirpal Singh, a sapper and an Indian is nicknamed Kip by the English. Kirpal Singh is a member of the imperial army and was trained in bomb-disposal. He acquires English ways too. He indulges in an affair with Hana. Hana believes that she and Kip could get along very well because they are “*both international bastards – born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to get away from our homelands all our lives*”. [EP, 188] Kip’s brown skin was different in the establishment of his individual identity.

Kirpal Singh is “Kip” for the Britishers; his Indian identity is submerged. But his “Indianness” resurfaces in his mannerisms. His bathing, eating and religious habits are observed and commented on by Hana, Caravaggio and the narrator. He always explains his actions and Indianness: I grew up in India, Uncle. You wash your hands all the time. Before all meals. A habit. I was born in the Punjab.’ [EP, 81]

Caravaggio relates him to an ‘animal’:

*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. [EP, 93]*

Kip’s approach to art and music shows his instinctive approach to the world around him in England and Europe. When he was watching statue of Virgin Mary from the beach, he was not allowed freedom of movement. Kip’s attachment to Hana transcends time and geography, and even the realities of nationality. But Hana regards Kip as not only of India, but the entire Asia: “She imagines all of Asia through the gestures of this one man. The way he lazily moves, his quiet civilization” [EP, 229].

Kip is the product of the English colonial power in India. His real name Kirpal Singh has been forgotten. He exemplifies the ‘other’ who is not quite white. The character of Kip and English Patient are markers of identity because “English” as applied to the patient and “Indian” as applied to Kip are classifications of nationality. Kip with his turban and long hair is distinct from the British soldiers. He desperately wanted to establish a monolithic identity. But he was absolutely sure that it could prove to be futile because he is more ‘British’ among his fellow soldiers.

He defuses the bombs and protects the Italian people at their ceremonies. Kip’s brother considers him to be a fool for trusting the English. He says, ‘I will open my eyes. Asia is still not a free continent, and he is appalled at how we throw ourselves into English wars. It is a battle of opinion we have always had. “One day you will open your eyes’, my brother keeps saying”. [EP, 229] Kip’s brother ignores the fact that the Sikhs have been oppressed by the Japanese in Malaya. Kip worked for some time in England. Later on, he was shifted to Italy and worked to defuse bombs. Kip speaks of his conversion by the missionary rules and tradition that replaced those of his own 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. Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had the histories and printing presses? [EP, 301]*

He directs his anger towards the man whom he relates with the Britishers. It is suggestive of his cultural degradation. He wanted to kill the English Patient. He put the earphones of his radio on the English Patient’s head and compels him to listen to the barbaric assault of the white people on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He diffuses the bombs the colonizers throw on each other countries. He resents and acknowledges his complicity with the colonizers. Even though he diffuses the bombs, he feels guilty that he is a part of British force and cannot directly prevent them from indulging in destruction. Kip is not at all bothered about the identity of the English Patient. It does not matter to

him whether the English Patient was on the side of the German or the British. The nationality of the imperial forces does not matter to Kip as he tells Caravaggio:

*American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman. You had King Leopald of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English.* [EP, 304]

He coerces the English Patient into the category of white people who dropped the atomic bomb. Kip thinks that the white people are racist.

Caravaggio was a thief but used by the British forces. Caravaggio was a Canadian thief. He knew Hana and her father in Toronto before the war. He is a traveler possessing “*polytropic identities-the thief, the double agent, the drunk, the lover, and the uncle*”. [CR 14.1, 2000:138] He invokes the memories of past in Hana. It is conceptualized that “*Madox was a man who died because of nations*” [EP, 257]. Madox is disgusted with the world and wars.

Almasy and Kip are the nowhere men, born in one place and deciding to live in another. They are confronted with the vital “*question of 'where and what is home' and 'become mapmakers of a different sort in the brave new world, building imaginary homelands as Salman Rushdie calls them by superimposing the memory of their native lands on the history of their dream lands*” [CES 16.1, 1993:97-98]. So it can be said that the novel is “*firmly on the side of the nomadic, of Almasy and Kip and Hana, all of whom refuse the hypostases of name, nation, possession and Law*” [JCL 37.1, 2002:70] Thus, escaping one's nation, becomes a metaphor for escaping one's past, and creating a new identity, one that is transnational.

The narrative moves to the different spaces constantly. A geographical exploration takes place into the Gilf Kebir, the love affair between Katharine and Almasy in Cairo. The final stages of the Second World War are shown in and around Florence.

Almasy maintains his love for Katherine even though he is unable to see her or reach her in the cave. Similarly, Kip leaves Italy to marry in India, but never loses his connection to Hana, whom he imagines thirteen years; follows halfway across the world. Also, Almasy follows Herodotus' writings across time through the desert. Maps and geography become details, mere artificial lives man imposes on the landscape.

Almasy falls in love with Katharine in Cairo. He was educated in England and was known as “the English spy” in Cairo. Almasy and Kip get along well because they are both “international bastards” born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Kip has attached himself to the English nation, and knows he could never imagine doing the same job for the Germans. Almasy has left his European home and joined the nation that is the desert. Madox was the English Patient's best friend in the desert for ten years. When he hears the sermon in the church in support of the war, he commits suicide. The English Patient comments that he died because of nations.

It becomes evident that national identity becomes more relevant during the war time. This reality invades Almasy's life in the desert and Kip's life in the Italian Villa. Almasy is a suspect, as his name sounds foreign. His identity follows him even after he is burned beyond recognition as Caravaggio realizes that he is not even “English”. The news of the atomic bomb reminds him that Western aggression still exists and crushes Asian people. The atomic bomb reminds the characters of the foolishness and power of nation-states. Hence, national identity is an inescapable part of all the characters, over which they have no control. In the novel, European cultural traditions are amalgamated with Indian, African and Bedouin traditions.



At the end of the novel, both Kip and Hana are back into their native countries where they feel imprisoned. This feeling of suffocation becomes more evident as Caravaggio says:

*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? A farmer on the western front cannot prune a tree without ruining his saw. Why? Because of the amount of shrapnel shot into it during the last war. Even the trees are thick and leave you here and they fuck off somewhere else to cause trouble, inky-dinky parlez-vous. We should all move out together. [EP, 129]*

This again is the paradigm of transnationalism, which elucidates the need to move to different places and not belong to any one culture or nation.

Thus, the idea of national identity is in flux. Notion of nation is blurred, as these all characters represent their national identity superficially but belong to no specific nation. They all are transnational citizens of the world. Ultimately, this transnational identity is also obscure and absurd.

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