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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE CONCEPT OF NATIONALISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: A STUDY OF THE DIFFERENT CHARACTERS PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL DISPLACEMENT DUE TO COLONIZATION IN THE NOVEL *THE ENGLISH PATIENT* BY MICHAEL ONDAATJE

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The aim of this paper is to explore the identity crisis in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* from the postcolonial perspectives. Actually this novel has been discussed through the concept of nationalism, therefore gave more concentration towards the cultural, psychological and physical displacement due to colonization, exploration and the shifting notion from one place to another place. This paper's main focus has centered around the issues of national identities, the streams of European explorers, scientists and spies. After these significant issues, the another important focus was about an exceptional man in this novel and whose name was Kip. He was a colonized figure who acted as a bomb defuser in British army. To analyse the concept of nationalism and national identity, I would like to mention the theories of Benedict Anderson, theories and views of Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, Franz Fanon, Edward Said, and so on. Desert was the predominant setting in this novel, like these scientists desert has been considered as unmanageable and unsustainable because of sand storm. Therefore, the scientists investigations were difficult and they can hardly achieve to map out the desert. The surface of the desert changed rapidly which has been presented in this novel *The English Patient*. The unreliable nature of desert symbolized the unreliable national identities, which was shattered and isolated because of the traumatic conditions of the characters in the unknown landscape and different culture. Moreover, this paper will elucidate the weak vigour of identities and the hybrid identity holder man named Kip who was the representative of dual identity after staying in an European colonization.

INTRODUCTION

In the novel *The English Patient*, identity crisis and displacement were the two most prominent themes which has been depicted by Michael Ondaatje. The story of this novel was concerned to exhibit the struggles and sufferings about the problem of identity crisis and displacement that experienced by both the colonizer and the colonized people. In this novel, the main characteristics of identity was related with the social construct where the relationship between self and other are the two salient issues. The sense of belonging actually based on the concept of our identity since we are the members of different ethnic groups or nations. Because social classes, the nations are also like communities which can provide the sense of belonging via the individual's notion of conduct towards his or her fellow men. In other words we can say, "Individuals think that they are a part of one collective body, namely, a community known as nation, which is in fact an idea". (Anderson 6). Here Anderson defined individuals as "imagery communities". To make a stable identity, the nations rely upon the invention and performance of history, culture and traditions.

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Most importantly national history remains as a significant area in the sense of the past narrations that experienced of being a member to a community. To present an exceptional version of past and identity we can accumulate a common past and a synthesized identity of any community. If we consider the theory of Benedict Anderson we have to take his ideologies of nations as "imagery communities". The nations sense of belonging can also be defined through a shared territory which usually those nations take as their own. Most of the scholars agree on Western origin such as Western capitalism, industrialization and colonial expansion. And these issues has created the way for imperialism. The Western ideas of nationalism and national identity encouraged the development of colonized inhabitants regarding their own sense of nationalism and national identity against the colonial people's national identity. Frantz Fanon remarked about the colonized people's nationalism in his *The Wretched of the Earth*, "However this anticolonial nationalism could not provide the colonised peoples with a sense of homogeneous national unity due to the diversity of ethnic groups within them, particularly because the elite nationalist rule neglected the subaltern masses and privileged the elite over the subaltern, which turned nationalism into a rule of elite dominations". The concept of nation and nationalism are necessary elements towards the imperialists expansion which has emerged from

Western capitalization. But to bring the national liberation and the concept of nation and nationalism which has been rooted from Western capitalization. There fore became the failure one. That kind of failure happened despite of the heterogeneous groups of people called as anti colonial nationalism in the former colonies who were stood against the imperialist ruling power. Both of the parties such as colonial or anti colonial groups has been considered as essentialists and racists on the basis of their support of the ruling elite but ignored the lesser known ethnic groups. *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje has created about this nation and nationalism that formed the identities via colonial and anti colonial nationalism. In this novel all the characters were exhibited as exiled persons from their homeland who has lived together at the Villa San Girolamo at the end of World War II.

The Canadian nurse Hana's life's sufferings and her duties towards her job

At first I would like to discuss about the character Hana who was an Canadian nurse, and did volunteer for war service. In personal life she has gone through many struggle and sufferings. Her husband has been killed and that's why she had to abort her unborn child. This was the great trauma in her life which has made Hana as a shattered person. After this sad event, she has got another heart breaking news of her father's death by burns. She was actually having the nervous breakdown because of all those sorrowful events in her life, but she didn't stop to give service to the war affected people and continuously she was dealing with the wounded and dying. In the mean time the Canadian Infantry Division continued to shift in Italy, but Hana stayed behind at the villa to nurse a dying burnt man who is called the 'English patient'. The another member of the villa other than the English patient was Kip, a Sikh, who was a sapper in the British army and finally, Caravaggio, the thief, an Italian-Canadian and a friend of Hana's father.

The novel's different characters' sense of nationalism and identity crisis

Almasy was the main protagonist of this novel who was suffering from the identity crisis. As he was severely injured and got burnt in the way that, the trace of his real identity was beyond recognition. The actual identity of this burnt man was the Hungarian Count Ladislaus de Almasy, who was a desert explorer and helped the Germans to navigate the deserts. Being a desert explorer his duties was to describe precisely the name and to some extent to possess the unmapped desert which is a vast territory. By carrying the job to trace out the map of desert, now his own identity or the features has been erased and left him as the name of English patient. In fact, the inhabitants of the Villa were all displaced because they have been exiled and therefore have found their new identities in a place other than their homeland. After finding no other ways they have formed a new community in the Villa, which was like Eden, isolated from the outside world of war and violence. As the novel has questioned about colonial and anti-colonial nationalism, which shaped their identities. But in real sense it actually did break the colonial hierarchies, particularly the imperial conception of space and place through the mapping of the desert. This mapping of desert was known as an instrument of colonial domination. The desert's nature was like difficult to

remember as it symbolizes the characteristics of vastness and uncontrollable sand storms. To map out a space means to name it and possess it as it becomes a place as seized territory, and attempt to help the invaders, explorers and traders to understand their plans and aspirations. Almasy was aware of the fact that mapping is a form of knowledge for creating power and domination:

“The ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence. On one side servants and slaves and tides of power and correspondence with the Geographical Society. On the other the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever. (Ondaatje, 141). Without any doubt it is to be said that, colonial powers build the oppressive social classes and organizations like the Geographical area to explore new lands for colonial domination. Almasy also created that colonial identity which was narcissistic, ready to exhibit its own identity onto anything it possesses as if it were a complete unified self:

“When we are young we do not look into mirrors. It is when we are old, concerned with our name, our legend, what our lives will mean to the future. We become vain with the names we own, our claims to have been the first eyes, the strongest army, the cleverest merchant. It is when he is old that Narcissus wants a graven image of himself. (Ondaatje, 141-42). However, Almasy was aware about the colonial imposition about the ingrained meanings on space which has no meanings, because space is a socio-political thing which has been named by the particular people in relation to their experiences and that colonial imposition of fixed meanings on space is meaningless because space is a socio-political construction and named by particular people in relation to their experiences and ambitions throughout history,

“So history enters us. I knew maps of the sea floor, maps that depict weaknesses in the shield of the earth, charts painted on skin that contain the various routes of the Crusades. So I knew their place before I crashed among them, knew when Alexander had traversed it in an earlier age for his cause or that greed. I knew the customs of nomads besotted by silk or wells”. (Ondaatje, 18). The above lines reflected the transience of empires, nations and civilizations which has constituted history. In the same way identity was also transient and elusive for Almasy:

“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 become nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations. The desert could not be claimed or owned-it was a piece of cloth carried by the winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treatises quilted Europe and East. Its caravans, those strange rambling feasts and cultures left nothing behind, not an amber. All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape. Erase the family name. Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert”.

(Ondaatje, 138-9). As we can see, in this novel the desert has been used as a metaphor which did represent the issue of transience. The concept of desert was not claimed, or defined. Hence to map it, and did create the meaning of ownership and possession as colonial notions, which was meaningless. The attributes of desert is to refuse anything artificial such as borders or names as a landscape because through sand storms those borders or names of a landscape will be changed continuously. Rather than desert is a place of freedom where national identities become vanished. Almasi criticized about the Colonial nationalism which has imposed artificial borders through mapping and also wars because of money and political power. After thinking like that, Almasi wanted to eliminate all national identities constructed by western nationalism which was responsible for constructing artificial borders that create the separation among the people of a nation. Almasi's close friend Madox has died because he got shocked by the Western nationalism and national identity. Madox got to know that those Western nationalism and national identity did honour the war instead of civilization. In this way Madox committed suicide after his return to England during the congregation when the priest gave a sermon in honour of war. Being a member of the Geographic Society, Madox strongly believed in Western nationalism with its extreme patriotism about saving the world for civilization and human progress. But like Almasi, his national identity has been erased during the desert explorations and therefore he killed himself because he felt betrayed by Western nationalism and national identity. Like Madox, Almasi also did hate his own social identity on which Western nationalism has been discerned. He then made up of diverse cultural influences which resist any final definition as he said,

“Kip and I are both international bastards-born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere.”(Ondaatje,176) Homi Bhabha, in his influential essay, “Dissemination, time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation,” argued 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. They are ambivalent because nationalism as a “pedagogic discourse” claims a shared, continuous history which links past and present as a linear sequence of time. However, nationalist discourses are also “performative” because they are “repetitious” and “recursive” in the sense that they are open to subtle alterations in the course of time. Nations are constructed continuously by national subjects through new ideas that change their institutions as well”.

In other words, the nation is never fixed, it is divided within itself

“ We are confronted with nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The barred Nation It/Self, alienated from its eternal self-generation, becomes a liminal signifying space that is internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference”. (Ondaatje,148). The sermon of a priest which has legitimized war and violence as a nationalist discourse at the expense of human life fuelled the speed of Maddox's suicide. Kip, the sapper, was another character with an elusive identity in the novel.

He was a young Sikh, a bomb defuser who seemed absorbed into English culture. As a colonized, he has a double view about life because of his hybrid identity. This in-between identity did disturb the binary oppositions of racist and colonial discourses. Kip, did praise his commanding officer Lord Suffolk, and became assimilated into English culture as he was re-named Kip although his real name was Kirpal Singh. He sung of the song:

“They're changing guard at Buckingham Palace/ Christopher Robin went down with Alice”. (Ondaatje, 211) This was a song that his friend Hardy used to sing while he do the work of defusing a bomb, therefore it indicated his mimicry of English culture. As Kip got the hybrid identity. And this has been created the in-between identity even though he seemed assimilated into English culture. He also experienced disappointments with English culture and finally converted to his traditional culture as an anti-western Sikh nationalist like his brother. Unlike his brother, Kip joined the British army willingly. Yet, he was remained under the doubtful conditions by his white colleagues. He was accepted as Lord Suffolk's household which was only in England. Lord Suffolk was Kip's mentor, trainer and surrogate father, who was also a bomb defuser. When he and his team has been killed while destroying a new type of bomb. Kip got utterly disappointed with Western civilization and he became emotionally withdrawn. He has left England and went to Italy to work as a sapper, and that was the place where he met with Hana, the nurse, and the two became lovers. once again, the Villa was a place where Kip has been accepted and welcomed by the Western residents in the Villa, named Hana, the English patient /Almasi, Caravaggio, the Canadian thief. They all even celebrated Hana's 21st birth day, a symbol of their friendship.

They all seemed to ignore their national and racial origins. The Villa, symbolized the desert, a place of refuge almost like Eden, where nations, races, identity crisis which were known as fake that divided human beings and made them as meaningless. However, on August Kip did hear the news of atomic bomb which has been dropped on Japan. He got furious and believed that a Western country would never do such a devastating deed against another Western country. Kip then threatened to kill the English Patient, whom he considered as a symbol of the West because he believed he is an English. Entirely Kip's attitudes was against the English which was very unfortunate thinking of him and kept the racial and aggressive mind towards the West. This type of mind set was contrasted with the Edenic and calm atmosphere of the Villa where racial boundaries didn't exist. Kip's anti-Western attitudes and his determination to abandon his Western friends again did prove his sense of cultural displacement and as well as his disappointment with Western culture. As a dual identity with a double view, he has stared at the photograph of his family and did questions himself:

“His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here”(Ondaatje, 287). Even though his friends called him “Kip,” he was no longer Kip, but Kirpal Singh and the sapper till the end of the novel. Towards the end of this Kip became a medical doctor and a married man with two children who was turned himself from Kip to Kirpal. But often he felt that he did wrong for taking the decision to leave Hana without a word,

It seems every month he witnesses her this way, as if these moments of revelation are a continuation of the letters she wrote to him every year, getting no reply, until she stopped sending them, turned away by his silence. His character, he supposed. Now there are these urges to talk with her during a meal and return to that stage they were most intimate at in the tent or in the English patient's room, both of which contained the turbulent river of space between them". (301-2)

After exploring this novel it can be said that neither the English Patient as a Westerner nor Kip as a colonized native. Therefore they had no united homogenous and firmly fixed identity. In fact, the residents of the Villa as displaced individuals and far away from their homeland have suffered patiently with the physical and psychological wounds in different ways during the war. And this endurance was from both the Westerner and colonized sides. They tried to make themselves healed through their friendship while their old identities became incorporated and also Kip went back to his traditional national identity. However, as a colonized and dual identity, Kip was almost an ambivalent character. To relate the ambivalent character with Kip, here i need to add Homi Bhabha's words for mimicry,

"He is like a mimic man who is "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha, 86). In another words he said, "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace"(Bhabha, 86). The threat of mimicry for Bhabha is its double vision which betrays the ambivalence of the colonized people who can threat the colonizer simply by using the discourse of colonialism as a means of refusal to accept or disobedience. For example, Kip who was trained and a loyal officer in the British Army and also did adopt English customs, but suddenly did rebel against the West and deserted his Western friends because of his instinct of racial attitudes based on generalization against the West. In fact he did consider his friends as colonizers just as all natives were treated as inferior stereotypes by colonizers. Those colonizers called them "wild" or "barbaric savages", "My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them. But we, oh, we were easily impressed-by speeches and medals and your ceremonies. What have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For his to happen"? (Ondaatje, 284-85). Frantz Fanon, who did refuse the absolutely graceful perfection of native traditions and cultures of the past, such as pre-colonial period, referred to the reform of traditional culture through a rearranged conditions and reinterpretation of it in order to create a shape of a national awareness for the native inhabitants in the present era. He also argued in his "The Wretched of the Earth", that the cultural evolution of the Western-educated native, intellectual writer to create an anti colonial awareness has three significant phases,

" The first one is the assimilation stage in which the native identifies with the colonizing power and its culture more than his own native culture as in the case of Kip, though he is not a writer. The second stage in which the native intellectual remembers his authentic identity, refuses any attempt to assimilate (158-9), Firstly Kip has refused and gradually at last in the third stage which is the combat stage. Kip was the intellectual native for Fanon who was the colonized writer and who was directly involved in the struggle against colonialism

together with his fellowmen and "combat literature, revolutionary literature, national literature emerges" (159). In Kip's issue, he was no longer attached in the British Army but worked as a medical doctor in his own country. He got married and has two children whose brown skin indicated and emphasized together with their national customs and habits in the novel.

It is clear that he loved his family and was certainly proud of his son's wit in the house. However, as Fanon suggested the sense of national consciousness and self-awareness through national liberation against the colonial rule, his concept of national consciousness was not essentialist or racist. On the contrary, it has an international notion like his concept of a "new humanism", "Self-awareness does not mean closing doors on communication. Philosophy teaches us on the contrary that it is its guarantee. National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is alone capable of giving us an international dimension" (179). Likewise, Edward Said in his Culture and Imperialism, wrote from a similar perspective, citing Fanon as well. In any case nativism is not the only alternative. There is the possibility of a more generous and pluralistic vision of the world, in which imperialism courses on, but the opportunities for liberation are open. In this phase liberation, and not nationalist independence is the new alternative, liberation which by its very nature involves, in Fanon's words, " a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness" (277-78)

Hence, even though Kip's enormous wrath and racially based generalizations, and his concept to revert towards the anti-Western national identity seemed essentialist and racist, as Gandhi said, "the mutual transformation of colonizer and colonized" as the fundamental principle of "post national/postcolonial ethics of hybridity" (Gandhi 140). Being a character of colonized person and as well as a person of dual identity that made Kip as an ambivalent character who was living in-between these two opposite cultures. At the end of the novel the focus was mainly towards Kip's thoughts of Hana and his family in India. As he loved his family very much but somehow he yearned to see Hana. Often he used to think of Hana and wanted to keep contact with her. This kind of nature considered the early signs of his transformation to shape a new social awareness beyond national awareness.

The English Patient was a novel which has been rejected the concept of history as one and only authoritative field of the past. Another historian called Herodotus who has considered as both the father of history and father of lies. Herodotus's book was about the resistance of the Greek city states to the Persian Empire, which has resembled to the resistance to the imperial powers that has ruled India and Africa. For example the British, or to the Germans and the allies who has stepped illegally to the African territory during the second World War. And this was mentioned in this novel. Since Herodotus's history was based on oral history rather than physical history. This type of history of Herodotus referred as the authoritative version of the past which was ruled by imperial powers just as the mapping of African deserts in the twentieth century by the colonial cartographers and betrayed the fact that these maps were regarded as instruments of colonial expansion and atrocity, therefore they can never be considered as they proclaimed to be.

Conclusion

To conclude, the novel that asked about nationalism and nations as colonial elements and concepts both in the fields of colonial and anti-colonial nationalism, which are imaginary, essentialist and racist. Those concepts of colonial and anti colonial notions have created the destruction of civilizations and suffering to both westerners and colonized subjects such as Almsy, Caravaggio, Hana and Kip. In the same way, the issues of national identity and narration of history has been explored as the elements of colonial nationalism. It did reveal the fact that neither history nor national or cultural identities can provide the sense of neutral feelings because they actually cannot provide access to the truth. Therefore, those issues are not sustainable or ingrained but elusive. The novel offered a post national/postcolonial reading of colonial discourse which has emphasised on the mutual transformation of colonizer and colonized such as in the case of Almsy and Kip, who have gone through with the process of transformed identity.

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