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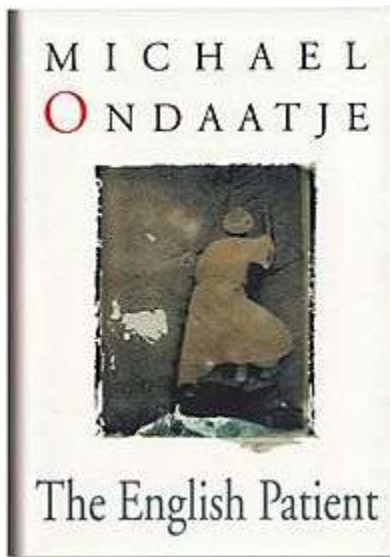
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Deconstructing the Nation – Transnationalism in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

V. Vijayalayan and Dr. Claramma Jose



Transnationalism and Literature

Transnationalism today is a pervasive global phenomenon. Demographic ties spanning nation-states have become a compulsive feature of the world in the present

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context. Transnational linkages have emerged as the essential lifeline that animate and sustain the current global order. This emergence to prominence of trans-nationalism has resulted in diverse repercussions. But perhaps its most telling impact is the radical refashioning of the concept of nation. Traditionally conceived as holistic entities, nations are being increasingly viewed as volatile structures. There is a growing consensus against exclusivist notions of the nation-state model. Ideas of jurisdiction and sovereignty are being widely redefined in fundamentally flexible and malleable terms. The conventional emphasis on reinforcing nationalist affiliations is being supplanted by an overwhelming inclination to affirm global or transnational allegiances. Literature, among many disciplines, has come to be significantly influenced by this paradigm shift (Vertovec 1-5).

Transnationalism and its subset anti-nationalism have become major concern of contemporary world literature. The emergence to prominence of diaspora literature as a specialized and distinct field of study in recent times bears ample testimony to the point. On account of being authored by subjects with torn or divided loyalties, diaspora texts exemplify a strong case for upholding trans-nationalist and antinationalist implications.

The Transnational Orientation of the Author of *English Patient*



Michael Ondaatje

Courtesy:

<http://www.bestofneworleans.com/blogofneworleans/archives/2010/10/25/michael-ondaatje-reads-at-tulane>

The Booker prize winning work of the Sri Lankan diaspora writer Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, presents a good case in point. The basic aim of this paper is to illustrate how this work through its many aspects, manifests and promotes a deconstructionist view of nationhood and a positive response to transnationalism.

The transnational orientation of this text essentially derives its impetus from its author's personal background. Michael Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka, which was then Ceylon, still under British rule. At nine he migrated to England from where at nineteen he

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followed his brother to Canada. Though he formally settled as a Canadian citizen, Ondaatje continued his globetrotting by holding visiting professorship in such varied places as Paris, Rome and Rhode Island. Diaspora writers for the most part have personal histories spanning two locations. Consequently, they tend to either engage in self recovery, tracing the roots back to their native land and tradition, or self preservation, adapting to the culture of their settler nation. But Ondaatje's history involving migration across more than two locations avoids any such straight forward possibilities. His sensibility, therefore, is most ideally suited to depicting the antinational and transnational stance without any unilateralist predilections (Spinks 1-10).

The English Patient

The English Patient depicts a situation involving a group of embattled and war weary exiles. The plot is set during the final days of the Second World War and takes place in a dilapidated villa situated at the south of Italy. Against this overwhelming backdrop of ruin and violence, the characters engage in a process of physical and emotional healing through forging an indelible bond of harmony and love. The point that all the characters involved are of different nationalities and belong to rival camps in the war makes this kinship unique and exemplary. If the war fought beyond the architectural ruins represents mindless violence and destruction wrought in the name of nation and nationality, the bond epitomizes a transnational phenomenon that urges the renunciation of nationalist prejudices. In this regard, it not only represents a perfect antidote to the hostilities of the war, but also a progressive and constructive way of moving into the future. Ondaatje presents many powerful symbols and images in the work that foreground and bolster the transnationalist theme exemplified in the relationship of the characters. What follows is a critical scrutiny of some of those portrayals recognized as most representative and forceful among the lot.

Consistent Enigma

Anonymous and unreadable, the English patient remains a consistent enigma throughout the text. The enigmatic feature of the patient's persona basically stems from his completely disfigured body. Owing to a plane crash, the body of the patient was utterly burnt beyond any recognition. He is **"A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire... There was nothing to recognize in him."**(EP 50).

This charred and blackened image of the patient constitutes the core symbol of the novel. It is paradoxical in that it constantly remains a "hermeneutic lure" (Spinks 178) posing a powerful and persistent temptation to decode it in terms of a definite and fixed identity, while simultaneously remaining tantalizingly irresolvable, a perplexing riddle. The unidentifiable figure of the patient becomes a blank canvas for projecting many shifting identities. The patient is variously identified in the course of the novel as a lover, cartographer, desert explorer, spy, invalid etc. Ironically, however, his true identity is never definitely discovered.

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A Metaphor for Fleeting and Fluid Identities

Ondaatje presents the English patient as a metaphor for fleeting and fluid identities. By doing so he attempts to dismantle popular notions of nation and nationality. The many accounts about his past life the English patient recounts are for the most part unconvincing and self contradictory. However, there is one thing about which the patient remains unswerving, his hatred for nations. **“I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states.”**(EP 147) for the patient nations engender and promote strong feelings of conflict and enmity. They limit and subjugate individual freedom and experience to constraints of rooted affiliation and ideology. The tendency to possess or belong is the one thing the patient dislikes the most. “What do you hate most? He asks. **“A lie. And you?”** **“Ownership”, he says.”**(EP 162).

True Meaning of Life

As far as the patient is concerned the true meaning of life lies in transcending the demands of external relations. By subjecting oneself to the claims of extrinsic forces, the individual robs life of its intrinsic value. To the patient, it is the existence of nations that constitutes the greatest threat in this regard. Hence, they should be dismantled. His very life of constant movement is a reaction against the idea of belonging or fixity that nations epitomize. By proclaiming himself to be an **“international bastard”** (EP 267), the patient celebrates the freedom of being rootless, the freedom of disowning national ties. Thus, the patient’s disfigured image becomes a “black hole” (Spinks 177) in which the demarcation of nations dissolves into essentially fluid formations.

The Desert Image

Intimately bound up with the portrayal of the patient in the story is the desert image. The desert’s close affinity with the patient is not merely owing to him being a desert explorer seeking the location of a lost oasis. The connection between the two is conceptual in essence. Like the patient whose disfigured body staunchly resists being deciphered in precise terms, the shimmering surface of the desert remains immune to all modes of inscription or demarcation. By its very nature, the desert transcends all efforts of acquisition, much in the same way the patient’s expressionless countenance exceeds fixed identities. **“The desert could not be claimed or owned. It was a piece of cloth carried by winds,”** (EP 147). If the patient is **“pure carbon”** (EP 115), the desert represents an untrammelled or **“pure zone”** (EP 261), and both lie outside the range of any physical or ideological appropriation. In fact, it is the desert that installs the antinationalist zeal in the patient. **“Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert”** (EP 148). The patient comes to develop an ardent hatred for nations fundamentally because he perceives the desert as an ideal space of dwelling. For him, nations represent the negation of all those features and virtues that make the desert utopian in his view. Nations are rigorously regulated social zones, which operate in

keeping with the logic of formal acquisition and administration. They epitomize the most powerful and pervasive form of ownership, the thing the patient most dislikes.

The Contrast between Desert and Nations

The conceptual contrast between the desert and nations become evident by the point that the glorious era of desert expeditions come to an end with the outbreak of the Second World War. The war is an ample manifestation of the destructive element in-built within the framework of the nation. Conversely, the desert experience that precedes the war is one of amity. Though set against the backdrop of the war, interestingly it is this pre-war phase that the patient's imagination is obsessed with. Almost the whole of the patient's recollections talk about his days in the desert. The war with its nationalist reverberations mean very little to the patient, compared to the liminal experience the desert offered him. The desert is thus, projected as the exemplary model for fashioning human experience. This is a telling witness to the novel's commitment to promote a transnational ideal. The desert is the scene of the expedition work, which brings together researchers from different nations. Subsequently, the desert compels these members into shedding their individual nationalities and merge themselves with its vast un-demarcated expanse.

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. Fire and sand (EP 148).

Furthermore, the desert is also the site of the patient's romantic liaison with Katharine, and both of them are of different nationalities. Thus, the desert becomes a space of transnational convergence, a place where boundaries are blurred and relationships are divested of parochial national interests.

The Dilapidated Villa – Passing Identities

Closely paralleling the desert and its transnational significance in the novel is the dilapidated villa. The war has reduced the place to an irredeemable state of decay and disrepair.

The limbs of most of the statues were blown off during the first days of shelling. There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, the damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth. (EP 45).

The location of the villa within a short distance of Florence, the treasure house of renaissance art, makes the crumbling architecture of the place “a grim reminder of the fragility of European cultural humanism in the face of political barbarism” (Spinks 173).

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However, it also exemplifies an explicit annihilation of the idea of wholeness. The overwhelming antinationalist resonance of the text naturally means that this annihilation fundamentally comes down to an undermining of the popular holistic notions of the nation-state. Seen in this regard, San Girolamo becomes a material incarnation of the conception of the nation as a porous and volatile entity which trans-nationalism foregrounds and promulgates. **They were protected by the simple fact that the villa seemed a ruin. But she felt safe here”” (EP 15).** This makes its ruined and mined feature its most redeeming and utopian quality, the one thing that makes it a safe haven from the insanities happening outside its premises.

Very much in keeping with the patient’s portrayal, the villa also represents a phenomenon of passing identities. From being a nunnery it becomes a lodging camp for the German troops, subsequently converted into a hospital when captured by the allied soldiers. It is noteworthy that with every new occupation increasingly substantial damages are inflicted on the villa’s architecture.

As the hill town began to be torn apart like a battleship at sea by fire shells, the troops moved from the barrack tents in the orchard into the now crowded bedrooms of the old nunnery. Sections of the chapel were blown up. Parts of the top storey of the villa crumbled under the explosion. (EP 13-14).

Thus, the ideal state of ruin in which the villa is left, is reached not through a linear but a turbulent progression of its history. Crucially, it is this tumultuous past that imparts to the villa’s persona its essential make-shift feature in the novel’s present. This in turn emphasizes its transnational foregrounding through facilitating an uninhibited freedom of movement within its crumbling space.

There were few beds left. She herself preferred to be nomadic in the house with her pallet or hammock, sleeping sometimes in the English patient’s room, sometimes in the hall, depending on temperature or wind or light (EP 14).

The villa also constitutes the scene of one of the most succinct and penetrating metaphors of this idea of emancipation. The recreational activity of hop scotch that Hana engages in, involves hopping across rectangular boxes drawn out on the floor in a pyramidal structure. This hopping from one formally enclosed space into another has a profound and enduring metaphorical implication in the story. Perceived in the light of the idea of mapping, a recurrent motif in the work, the pyramid of rectangles assumes a cartographic significance. They come to symbolize the neat assemblage of nations as represented on a map. The hopping across the boxes therefore signifies a blatant and deliberate violation of the normative barriers separating nations, foregrounding the idea of trans-nationalism.

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Inter-textuality

Epitomizing a reinforcement of this transnationalist theme affirmed by the ruined villa is the element of inter-textuality in the novel. Ondaatje incorporates into the plot of his work a series of allusions to several texts. These range from the Russian classic 'Anna Karenina' to Cooper's 'The Last of the Mohicans', Kipling's 'Kim', Stendhal's 'The Charterhouse of Parma', Milton's 'Paradise Lost', 'Histories' by Herodotus and Ondaatje's own 'In the Skin of a Lion'. All these works are fashioned together into a complex weaving of inter-textual references in the fabric of *The English Patient's* narrative.

It is noteworthy that this inter-textual webbing constitutes an intrinsic design of the work and not just a surface feature. For instance, the transformation of Kirpal Singh into Kip closely resembles the rendition of Kimball O'Hara into Kim. Strengthening this connection is the point that both these men essentially lead a vagabond existence working for the British undertaking high risk missions. Similarly Catherine's romance with Almasay derives its basic inspiration from the relationship of Anna and Vronsky in Tolstoy's magnum opus. In fact, the clandestine affair itself is essentially triggered off by a textual stimulus, Katharine's reading of the tale of Candules and his queen, the first of the many stories in Herodotus' *Histories*.

Notably all these texts alluded to in the plot constitute masterpieces or famous works in literatures spanning diverse nations across the world. By fashioning an intricate interweaving between them and making it an indispensable characteristic of the work, Ondaatje symbolically reiterates the idea of forging linkages across nations in literary terms. Thus, the aspect of inter-textuality becomes a powerful propellant of the work's ideological commitment to trans-nationalism.

The Concept of History

Intertwined with and complimentary to the feature of inter-textuality is the portrayal of the concept of history in the novel.

Contrary to the popular notion of history as a linear and complete phenomenon, Ondaatje's text envisages a radical view of history as plural and continuous. This fluid idea of history is fore-grounded fundamentally through the *Histories* of Herodotus, arguably the most significant of the many textual allusions in the novel. Herodotus' text is ground-breaking in that it presents a model of writing, which presents history as essentially a type of narrative. It also adopts the literary mode of story-telling rather than the historical mode of factual narration as its chief form of composition. It is precisely for these reasons that Herodotus proclaimed as the father of history, is also dubiously dubbed the father of lies.

Pluralist Notion of History

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Despite the controversies surrounding it, for the patient, the Histories represent the “ne plus ultra of writing in general” (Spinks 181). Furthermore, it constitutes an extension of himself, a work forming an integral part of his personality. Just like his body that is burnt beyond recognition, his copy of Herodotus’ work is also disfigured by the many interpolations inserted into it. Besides, it is the sole relic from his past life that survives the flight accident.

It is the book he brought with him through the fire, a copy of the Histories by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observation, so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus (EP 17).

By promulgating a pluralist notion of history, the work of Herodotus undermines unilateral conceptions of historical tradition and cultural lineage. This feature of the work is further augmented by the many additions by the patient, which renders it, if possible, even more ambivalent. The enduring character of unity and stability attributed to nations is invariably founded on the presence of a linear top-down model of nationalist history. By deconstructing any such encapsulated views of history, the text of Herodotus, like the image of the patient, endorses an essentially fluid conception of the nation-state.

Portrayal of Love

Integrally linked with the work’s feature of inter-textuality is the portrayal of love in the story. In fact, the delineation of the idea of love in the text is inextricably tied up with every element in the work that foregrounds its transnational framework. *The English Patient* reinforces the point that it is only through love, a selfless and untainted form of affectionate compassion, that national barriers can be truly breached and transnational affinities consolidated. This faith in the far-reaching and indispensable power of love persists throughout the text. Hannah risks her life and stays back in the villa to nurse the patient, principally because she loves him. Caravaggio arrives in the villa seeking Hannah and decides to stay, chiefly because he loves her. The patient puts his life in jeopardy in going back to the cave to salvage Catherine’s body, though she’s laid there dead for many years, because of his sincere love for her. In all these manifestations of love there is absolutely no prospect of material profit or any form of gain involved.

The acts of kindness displayed by each of the characters is purely done out of selfless love for each other. It is this altruistic feature that enables each of the characters to transcend the formal constraints enforced on them by the world at large. Ultimately, all forms of temporal and spatial demarcation dissolve into oblivion in the wake of the characters’ love for each other. Though the news of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, breaks up this bond physically it nevertheless endures emotionally. The final imagery of the novel entails an incisive and memorable illustration of this point.

Enduring Ties

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Projecting fifteen years into the future after they left the villa, the novel depicts Kip as a doctor in his native state of Punjab, while simultaneously portraying Hannah in her Canadian residence. They have not seen or written to each other for over a decade. Yet the relationship they forged in the villa is mysteriously retained in their minds. Transnationalism or the sustained linkages between people across nations cannot have a more concrete or explicit representation than this enduring tie between the former sapper and the nurse. Ondaatje captures this amalgamation rightly through the deconstructionist mode of splicing together two separate images into one.

And so Hannah moves and her face turns and in regret she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal's left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles"(EP 321).

By delineating Kip as completing the action initiated by Hannah, Ondaatje portrays both their gestures as incomplete in themselves. They become a whole only when synchronized. The creation and sustenance of linkages across nation-states will be possible and effective only by an integration forged on the lines of spatial, cultural and temporal hybridity. Thus, transnationalism is a disjunctive phenomenon that freely cuts across all pre-set or pre-given categories rendering them fluid and amorphous in the process.

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