

**IN SEARCH OF CENTRE: IDENTITY CRISIS IN
MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S 'THE ENGLISH PATIENT'**

MADHURI BHOSALE
RESEARCH SCHOLAR
UNIVERSITY OF SOLAPUR, INDIA.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse identity crisis in Michael Ondaatje's The English patient which emphasizes identity crisis, cultural displacement due to colonization, travelling referring to the theories of Homi Bhabha, Fanon Enwezor Okwui etc. The paper will mainly focus on erasure of identity of English accented Hungarian man named English patient, colonized native Kip who is in search of centre having hybrid identity. The paper will emphasize the national identity of explorers, scientists and spies including colonized Kip who is shaped by the Western powers and never arrives at final identity. As seen neither English Patient nor Kip as a colonized native has a unified, homogeneous and stable identity.

Keywords: immigration, hybridity, identity crisis, Diaspora etc.

IN SEARCH OF CENTRE: IDENTITY CRISIS IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S 'THE ENGLISH PATIENT'

-MADHURI BHOSALE

In the last thirty years, we have witnessed fundamental problems that the immigrants face in alien country. Immigration of the people from one country to another gives birth to different problems like homeland, displacement, exile, expatriation etc. Diaspora is generally used for dispersal and migration of people. Diaspora refers not only to geographical dispersal but also brings in the issues of identity, memory and home which such dispersal causes. The term Diaspora refers to any minority group identifying with a particular homeland.

William Safran was the first scholar to undertake a definition of the term in the first issue of the journal, Diaspora. He defines it in relation to six characteristics linked to two invariables -- homeland and exile. These characteristics are the dispersal of a people or their ancestors from a specific original 'Centre' to two or more 'peripheral' places. The maintenance of a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland, a feeling of non- acceptance, alienation, or insulation in the host society a strong feeling that the ancestral homeland is the 'true ideal home', and a place of eventual return to which they or their descendants would collectively be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and a self conscious definition of one's ethnicity in terms of the existence of this homeland, In Enwezor, Okwvi's words,

'The diasporic space is the quite essential late 20th century space in which the terms of modern immigration exile, loss, nation subject and citizen are negotiated and reinvented for various uses.'

Diasporic writer experiences dislocation and finds himself caught between a flux of two opposing cultures and two contrasting worlds. They try to negotiate a new space for himself. The expatriate occupies a marginal or

borderline status. He sits on the periphery of the past and allows the future to take its own course. This sense of marginalization results in an identity crisis, sense of alienation and isolation in the host country and he finds himself a marginalized and border lined. In this way immigrant faces the problem of unhousement and rootlessness.

Sri Lankan born Canadian Diasporic author like Michael Ondaatje also deeply influenced by the problems of migration and immigration. He have attempted to portray the bitter feelings of homelessness and otherness in his fictional works. Ondaatje has carved a unique place among the diasporic authors. Michael Ondaatje's fictions are about the immigrants facing the problem of identity and addressing the burning issues of diaspora - question of identity of those who are culturally displaced. Michael Ondaatje born in Sri Lanka and moved to England and Canada where he has lived ever since.

The Present article attempts to study Michael Ondaatje's 'The English Patient' a booker prize winning novel as a story of cultural conflict and identity crisis. It mainly focuses on the erasure of national identity of European explorers, scientists and spies, including colonized Kip, an Indian serving as a bomb defuser in British Army. This novel seeks to explore the problem of identity and displacement experienced both by the colonizer and colonized. All the characters are exiles from their homeland who have gathered together at the 'San Girolamo' villa at the end of World War II. Hana is a Canadian nurse who volunteered for war services. She stays in the villa to nurse a dying burnt English accented, Hungarian man named English Patient. The third member of the villa is Kip or Kirpal Singh, Caravaggio a friend of Hana's father worked as a spy and captive of German.

In fact inhabitants of the villa are as displaced individuals because they are exiles who have found new identities in a place other than their homeland. They formed a new community in the villa, isolated from the outside world war and violence, both as Westerner and colonized native. The central figure of the novel is the English Patient whose identity is already erased as he is burnt beyond recognition. The colour of his skin is racial marker, is burnt away. He is Hungarian yet he is mistaken for an Englishmen, because of his

English dress and mannerisms and because he could speak English perfectly, being a Hungarian Axis spy count Laszlo de Almásy who actually hates the English. At the end his own identity is erased like unmapped desert. As desert is used as a metaphor of their unreliable national identity, that are fragmented and varied due to their traumatic personal experiences in this alien landscape and culture.

Identity crisis is acutely presented in the character of Kirpal Singh. Kip is also problematically given a nickname. His real name is Kirpal Singh and he is the only non-English member in the villa. 'The name had attached itself to him curiously. In his first bomb disposal Report in England some butter had marked his paper and the officer had exclaimed, "what's this? Kipper grease?" and laughter surrounded him. He had no idea what a kipper was, but the young Sikh had been thereby translated into a salty English fish. Within a week his real name, Kirpal Singh, had been forgotten.'

This nickname is indicative of the attempts of the English around him to colonize him, to make him more English and less foreign, however by accepting nickname Kip, Kirpal assimilated into English culture, without abandoning either is called "Hybridity" or 'syncretism'. Kip Being a ambivalent character having colonized and hybrid identity "Hybridity" refers to the state of being at the border of two cultures marked by a sense of "double consciousness" and "in-betweenness." Homi Bhabha observes that "the hybrid migrant occupies a "third space" where the colonial as well as the native identities meet and contest and simultaneously asserted and subverted," Kip fluctuates between two opposing cultures and feel alienated. His hatred of the west reaches its apex when he hears that the United States has dropped two atomic bombs on Japan and he decided to leave villa and his love 'Hana.' He no longer serves in the British Army but works as a medical doctor in his own country India and married there.

Kirpal fails to construct his identity. End of the novel is devoted in Kip's thoughts of Hana and his family in India. Despite of his love affection for his family, Kip longs to see Hana. Kip's search for identity keeps him to assume new identity but never arrives at final identity. As seen neither the English

Patient as a Westerner nor Kip as a colonized native has a unified homogenous and stable identity.

WORKS CITED

Bhabha Homi. "The Location Of Culture." London Routledge, 1994 print.

Enwezor, Okwui. 'A Question of Place'. Revisions, Reassessment, Diaspora in Transforming the crown:..African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain, 1966 -1996, ed By Mora Beauchamp byrd abd M. Franklin Sirmans, Caribbean Cultural Centre: New York 1977

Fanon, Frantz" The Wreched Of The Earth". Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press 2004

Ondaatje, Michael." The English Patient." London : Picador 1993

Safran William. 'Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return', Diaspora 01.01.1991.



Higher Education &
Research Society