



HYBRIDITY IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *THE ENGLISH PATIENT: A STUDY OF KIP*

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ABSTRACT

The English Patient is a novel by Michael Ondaatje. The novel questions the concept of a pure cultural or national identity and conceives the postmodern identity as hybrid identity. Nationality and identity are interconnected in The English Patient, functioning together to create a web of inescapable structures that tie the characters to certain places and times despite their best efforts to evade such confinement. The novel questions colonial and anti-colonial nationalism which shape the character's identities and it frequently breaks down colonial hierarchies. The post colonial element in the novel is established through the character Kip or Kirpal Singh who is a sapper employed in the British army. Kip has a complex identity which is the result of his exposure to Indian as well as the English culture. Bhabha in his seminal work Location of Culture shows the cultural influence of the coloniser on the colonised and the colonised on the coloniser which leads to the formation of a hybrid identity. The paper studies the formation of hybrid identity in Kip. It also studies the key concepts of hybrid identity like mimicry and the colonial other.

Key Words: Mimicry, Hybrid, Colonial Other, Kip, Homi K Bhabha

INTRODUCTION

The English patient is a novel by Michael Ondaatje published in 1992. The novel received the booker prize in the same year. The novel is a continuation of an earlier Ondaatje novel, In the Skin of a Lion. The writer's sense of poetry is apparent in the lyrical style of the work, and the novel's principal themes are continuation of themes that appeared in two of his earlier works: The Dainty Monsters (1967) and The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems (1970). Like the earlier works by Ondaatje, The English Patient explores love,

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memory, exile, the conflicted sense of national identity, the pitfalls of complicity with the ruling elite, the intensity of sexual passion, the postmodernist sense of history as a narrative, the conflict between creative and destructive energy, and how does the “other” manifest itself.

The novel is set in the backdrop of the Italian campaign during Second World War. The characters in this novel like the author are dislocated from their homeland due to war. They live in a villa in an Italian village, forging new ties with each other. It is a story of a badly burned man with an enigmatic identity. The story is sensuous, mysterious, and philosophically inspirational. The novel also questions Euro centrism and colonialism, and presents the issue of an identity constructed from different cultural origins. For Ondaatje, diaspora or geographical dispersion as a result of colonialism makes one’s identity unfixed and indeterminable. The indeterminacy of identity is echoed in the novel in the impossibility of mapping the borderless desert and of resolving the unknown identity of the charred patient; it is a story of allegiances in war, love and history and takes place in a ruined Italian villa north of Florence at the end of the Second World War.

The main characters include a twenty year-old Canadian nurse Hana, who has volunteered to stay behind to care for the unidentified burn patient and has grown weary of the war and life. The villa is a base for a young Indian sapper Kirpal Singh, a Sikh, nicknamed Kip by his English colleagues in the bomb disposal unit in the Royal Engineers. He defuses bombs in a land ruined by war where everything around him is unsafe, and is challenged by a foreign culture. Hana’s old family friend from Canada, David Caravaggio, is the other inhabitant of this villa. He is a thief, whose thumbs have cut off, searching for his identity, having to find himself again. All of the characters in the book are bound together by love and loss, by absence and desire. At the centre of the pattern, controlling it by her terrible absence, is Katharine Clifton, whose death constitutes the awful secret of the English patient’s memory, and of the novel’s plot. The four of them gradually form a fragile community amidst the war.

Homi K Bhabha’s Concept of Hybridity

Homi K. Bhabha uses the term ‘colonial hybrid’ to explain the hybridization of cultures in colonized countries. *The Location of Culture* (1994) is Bhabha's seminal work in which he gives many of the definitions of the notion of hybridity and accounts of the diverse aspects of this concept. According to Bhabha “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the pure and original identity of authority)” (159).



Hybridity demonstrates how cultures come to be represented by processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are vicariously addressed to through an “Other”. According to Bhabha, the formation of colonial stereotypes proceeds via the projection onto the racial other one’s own properties that pose a threat or are experienced as negative. From the point of view of colonial discourse, the colonial other is defined as a racial other that is easily distinguished by virtue of being visibly different in appearance. In Bhabha’s theory, this satisfies the coloniser’s “pleasure of seeing” and further gratifies the need to distance and distinguish oneself from the other that is represented by the colonised. Bhabha argues that this is the way prejudice is formed : “It is not the colonialist Self or the colonised Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness – the white man’s artifice inscribed on the black man’s body and contributing to the creation of “the liminal problem of colonial identity” (106).

Bhabha notes that “the colonial stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive, and demands not only that we extend our critical and political objectives but that we change the object of analysis itself.” (16). The ‘other’ is not only one of ‘them’, but a type of complex representation. Bhabha explains that the hybridity makes the colonialist authority less prevalent as this authority can no longer base its superiority on another culture’s inferiority. To put it differently, the colonised culture has appropriated cultural traits from the colonialist authority in such a way that the authority cannot recognize the original traits of the colonised culture.

Bhabha uses the term ‘mimicry’ in the colonial context to describe how the colonized adapt to and eventually adopt the colonizer’s culture. Mimicry is one name for these low literary effect in colonial discourse, Bhabha also refers it as “sly civility”. Bhabha defines it as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its distance” (86).

Kip’s Hybrid Identity

The post colonial aspect in the novel is established through the character Kip or Kirpal Singh. Kirpal Singh or kip as he is referred to in the novel is a sapper who works for the British army. The Indian sapper is also depicted as a post colonial subject enticed by the English culture that has made him ignore his older brother’s anti-English remarks, siding with “whoever was against the English”. He is part of an elite bomb disposal squad which defuses bombs planted by the enemy. He is an Indian, a colonised native who works for the British army, the colonizer. His brother had refused to work anymore in the army because of his

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growing resentment against the British colonial rule in India. This forces Kirpal Singh to occupy the position of his brother in the British army. Right from the beginning of the novel, Kirpal Singh's status as a colonised native of India is established. He fights the colonial governments' wars in foreign soils as indicated by the narrator, "Kip is a foreigner to English culture when he first arrives in India. Singh had arrived in England knowing no one, distanced from his family in the Punjab. He was twenty one years old. He had met no one but soldiers" (Ondaatje 187).

In the case of Kip, it can be argued that he has assimilated his Indian identity with English culture through his experiences in the British army and his stay in England. His first encounter with the English culture is not so pleasant as he remarks "the English! They expect you to fight for them but won't talk to you." (Ondaatje 188). Much of the reason for Kip's fascination with England and English gentlemen relates to his relation to Lord Suffolk and his team. Lord Suffolk is an eccentric person who educates sappers for the British Army, and he welcomed Kip as an equal: "He stepped into a family, after a year abroad, as if he were the prodigal returned, offered a chair at the table, embraced with conversations" (Ondaatje 201). Since Kip left his family in India against his family's wishes, he became an outcast siding with the colonial power. In England, though, he is welcomed into the home of Lord Suffolk as if he were a lost son who has finally come home again. It is Lord Suffolk who introduces him to English culture. Kip greatly admired Lord Suffolk, and thought he represented the best of the English. Suffolk would tell Kip of English culture and customs just as if he were an Englishman himself, not a foreigner visiting their country. Suffolk was full of anecdotes and information, and taught Kip about western life. Lord Suffolk welcomes him as if he is a family member, a "prodigal returned, offered a chair at the table, embraced with conversations". He is really happy when he is welcomed by Lord Suffolk as it provides him with the possibility of community something which he craves for. Lord Suffolk not only introduces him to the basics of defusing bombs but also to English culture. He acts as a father figure and even a godfather of foreign English culture. He introduced the customs of England to the young Sikh as if it was a recently discovered culture. He talked to him "...about the migration of robins from the war zones of Europe, the history of bomb disposal, Devon cream" (Ondaatje 184). He is initiated into English culture by Lord Suffolk and Miss Morden. Lord Suffolk introduces him to various specialities of the Exmoor region where they continued training on weekends. They would often travel to different villages where Lord Suffolk often halted to describe the specialities and exotic items offered by each village. At one such instance, Lord Suffolk introduces Kip to a place called Humber which was the best place to buy blackthorn walking sticks. They also offer Kip to take him to an English play. Kip sees children's play Peter Pan accompanied by Miss Morden and Lord Suffolk. In this way, he introduces Kip to all the specialities and niceties of his region which is a window to understanding English culture. The friendly approach of Miss Morden and Lord Suffolk

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surprises kip as he suffers from cultural distance with the other Englishmen. This is evident when he admits to have felt as if the secretary Miss Morden was staring at him at the waiting room of the bomb disposal unit's office because of being the only Indian among the applicants. He senses that he would have been admitted easily if not for his race. Kip has not shed his English identity, or his sense of belonging to the British, since he seeks advice and wisdom from someone he believes to be superior to himself in terms of knowledge, namely the patient: 'In recent days, Hana had watched him sitting beside the English patient, and it seemed to her a reversal of Kim. The young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English' (Ondaatje 111). The impression that the patient is English is important for Kip's healing process as he needs someone who can replace Lord Suffolk as his mentor. Consequently, the patient also verifies his belief that the English are superior. As he thinks the patient is English, he still has a link to his English belonging.

Kip's hybridisation process occurs when he accesses western culture through works of art that influence his perception of the west and its cultural images. He acquires a hybrid identity while developing a deep appreciation of western art in Naples. Kirpal Singh's name change from Kirpal Singh to kip is part of this hybridisation process. His maiden name Kirpal Singh indicative of the community and caste of Singhs he belong to is no longer mentioned in the novel after he is nicknamed as "kip" by members of his bomb disposal unit.

The name kip had attached itself to him quite curiously and accidentally. In his first bomb disposal report in England some butter had marked his paper and the officer had exclaimed "what's this? Kipper grease." (Ondaatje 45). Everyone laughed on hearing this joke except him who had no idea what a kipper is. He did not know that he was being referred to as a kipper, a salty English fish. This incident transforms his name from Kirpal Singh to kip. He did not mind being called as a fish. He became so accustomed to this name that within a week he forgot his real name, Kirpal Singh. Lord Suffolk and his demolition team also called him by this nickname which he preferred to than the English habit of calling people by their surnames. However, there is a hint of violation in kip's renaming. Kirpal Singh, the colonised native, passively accepts the new name given to him by the colonial authority. Though he accepts the name change, it is done by people he does not know. They discard his Indian identity and rename him according to their preference. The colonialist authority replaces his Indian name with an English one. By changing Kip's name, the colonialist authority removes an important cultural trait, consequently discriminating Indian naming. Kip now no longer identifies himself as Indian, but due to his race and cultural background, he is not English either. As a colonised native with hybrid identity with a double perspective, he gazes at the photograph of his family as he questions himself: "His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here" (Ondaatje 287). Even though his friends call him "Kip," he is no longer Kip, but Kirpal Singh or the sapper till the end of the novel. The novel carries a

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commentary on the hybrid identity of kip, the narrator says “Although he is a man from Asia who has in these last years of war assumed English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son” (Ondaatje 217). He still retains his Indian identity. He has a deep knowledge and understanding of Indian culture even though he embraces some aspects of the English culture. He admits himself to be a hybrid, growing up with the Indian tradition as well as the English traditions. He says, “I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from your 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” (Ondaatje 283).

He is a hybrid, who takes up the coloniser’s that is Lord Suffolk’s English culture, at the same time; he never renounces any of his cultural moorings to India. When Caravaggio mocks his habit of washing hands before meals, he proudly announces that he grew up in India and at Punjab where hands are washed before all meals. He imparts his knowledge of Indian culture to Hana which indicates that he has not given up any part of his Indian identity. He speaks to her about warrior saints. He introduces her to Indian Goddesses, wheats and ribbons. It is through him that she was able to imagine all of Asia. He is reminded of his status as an Indian, a foreigner in the England after he defuses a bomb. He acquaints her with the customs of India. He tells her about the Gurudwara where one has to remove their shoes, wash their feet and cover their head before entering it. He tells her about the great saints of Punjab—Ramananda, Nanak and Kabir who hold an important place in the minds and hearts of Indians. He is so attuned to his cultural background that he even describes the smell of fruits and the melody of songs emerging from the temple to Hana. Even though he is in a foreign land surrounded by Englishmen, he does not forego his religious ethos.

In spite of the British uniform, he still retains the turban which the Sikhs traditionally wear on their heads. He has a khara or a bangle in one of his hands which the Sikhs are traditionally and religiously ordained to wear. He also provides Hana with an in depth explanation of the Holy book which is kept inside the shrine under a canopy of brocades which signifies his knowledge and close affinity to his community and religion. He introduces her to the world of Sikh culture and religion including the Gurugranth sahib the holy book of the Sikhs, the ragis or the musicians who sing the holy verses from Gurugranth sahib, the tree shrine where Baba Gujhaji the first priest of the temple is buried. He is not only acquainted with the religious beliefs but also superstitions of the community the knowledge of which he imparts to Hana. The tree shrine where Baba Gujhaji is buried is a tree of superstitions where young women often come and tie a thread to the branch of the tree beseeching for a son or daughter. This is a memory which is ever alive in kip’s mind. Kip’s mother is one of the many hundreds of women who have done this act in the hope of getting a boy child, a memory which is still intact within him. The fact that he is able to relive this memory despite the

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geographical distance and the affiliation to the British army which distances him from India points to his Indian heritage which is intact.

Kip takes great pride in Punjab, the place where he was born. He describes Punjab as a land of sacred trees and magic water to Hana. He prides on the claim that the Sikhs were good at technology. He feels Sikhs as a community have a mystical affinity with machines. After defusing a bomb in the field next to the villa, he is reminded of a scene in an English novel where all the old white men who had assembled to defuse the bomb hug and depart in glee after they successfully diffuse it. He cannot act like these white men as he is just a foreigner who is working for the British colonial government. He is a professional who has no respite from his busy career of defusing bombs yet he is a stranger, a foreigner who feels no kinship with the people or country he is working for. He admits “And he remained the foreigner, the Sikh” (Ondaatje 105). This indicates that he still identifies himself as an Indian even though he possesses many traits which are the products of English cultural influence.

Even kip’s food habits are a result of this complex intermingling of two cultures. He eats onions and herbs while in the villa which surprises Caravaggio. His eating habits are essentially Indian and the inmates of the villa including Caravaggio find it interesting. The inmates of the villa who are westerners had taken a week to adapt to his habits of eating. He takes efforts to secure onions and herbs which Caravaggio suspects he was taking from the Franciscans’ gardens during the time he spent there sweeping for mines. He eats fruits following this diet of onions and herbs. Caravaggio compares the diet of kip to that of some strange exotic animal because the food habits were Indian which was foreign and alien to Caravaggio. He retains his Indian food habits at the same time he enjoys drinking English tea. Everyday just at dawn he held out his cup for his daily share of English tea which he loved. Kip further appropriates Englishness when he finds a connection between Indian folklore and English during Lord Suffolk’s description of the murder of Lorna Doone: ‘To Singh it sounded like a familiar Indian fable’ (Ondaatje 185). He relates to the story and finds parallels to Indian fables. As he finds a connection between the two cultures, this also gives reason to merge them together and consequently becoming a hybrid of the two.

Even though Kip tries to appropriate English culture through mimicry, he is not an “other” who is inferior to the coloniser. He mimics Hardy’s English song while defusing a bomb. He mimics the coloniser, his white colleague Hardy’s English song about a girl called Alice who had married a British soldier Christopher Robins. By imitating his friend Hardy’s song, he is indulging in mimicry in which the colonised native mimics or imitates the culture of the colonizer. He further indulges in mimicry when he hums western songs he has learned for himself in the last three years of the war. By mimicking western songs he is also mimicking



the coloniser's culture as songs such as these belong to the repository of western culture that is the coloniser's culture.

Kip challenges the concept of the colonised other. The colonised native was conceived as an "other" who was considered as inferior to the coloniser. Kip is a highly trained professional which challenges the stereotype of the colonised Indians as low skilled labourers. When Kip had first applied for the position as part of the bomb detonation unit, he was worried he would be denied the job because of his race. However, Suffolk and his secretary, Miss Morden, told him he had completed the problems so well and had such a good character, that they were sure they would offer him the job. She tells him that she knew he would have got selection even before he took the exam. Of all the candidates he was the only one to be selected in Lord Suffolk's elite bomb disposal unit. He is continually focussed with all his knowledge and wit while defusing any bomb. He uses a set of crystal earphones to stay up to date with all that is going on in the world while he is defusing a bomb. When Hana observes his habits through binoculars, she notices how he handles his gears with expertise and ease. She is in awe of his skills. She appreciates him for having effortlessly and successfully defused a bomb in the field next to villa. She has seen him defusing the bomb at close quarters which leads her to appreciate his skills. She also appreciates him for possessing "a careful mind" which helps him in this task. His skill and intelligence comes to the fore when he is asked to detonate a complicated bomb placed by the Germans which kills Lord Suffolk and Miss Morden. He is clever enough to figure out the second gaine which the Germans had put in the bomb to complicate the process of dismantling the bomb. He also figures out the existence of a second gaze in bomb which will detonate one hour after defusing the bomb. He was successfully able to defuse the bomb once he figured out this mechanism. He wrote out detailed diagrams and explanations about this new bomb and was able to come up with a method of defusing bombs which would completely alter the way bombs were handled in England. He earns great respect amongst his colleagues because of his skill which makes him uncomfortable. In England he was used to being ignored by everyone because of his race. When his colleagues starts appreciating and respecting him for his skills, he no longer retains the anonymity which he was comfortable with. He realizes that now that he is far superior than his white colleagues in terms of his skills he could order them around and bully them as he wanted. In section five of the novel he says:

He knows he was for now a king, a puppet master, could order anything, a bucket of sand, a fruit pie for his needs, and those men who would not cross an uncrowded bar to speak with him when they were off duty would do what he desired. It was strange to him. As if he had been handed a large suit of clothes that he could roll around in and whose sleeves would drag behind him (Ondaatje 196).

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He goes to Italy along with other sappers to retain his anonymity. The character Kip therefore challenges the western notion of the “other”. The western notion of the other focussed on the inferiority of the colonised natives. Kip, a colonised native of India, was successfully able to defuse a complicated bomb devised by the Germans using his sheer skill and intelligence. The notion of the other is dismantled in the depiction of Kip who proves to be better than many of his colleagues/white colonizers.

Kip therefore has a dual belonging to India as well as to Britain. But this hybridity is rejected by him when Hiroshima and Nagasaki are bombed, which forces him to reject English culture altogether. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki enrages him. This incident makes him renounce the West. Kip also threatens to kill the English Patient, whom he regards as a symbol of the West because he believes he is English. Kip’s anti-Western outburst and his readiness to abandon his Western friends is once again due to his sense of cultural displacement as a consequence of his disappointment with Western culture. He returns to India following this incident, rejecting his friends in the villa and the English patient whom he collectively identifies with the West. Even though his friends call him “Kip,” he is no longer Kip, but Kirpal Singh or the sapper till the end of the novel.

CONCLUSION

Kip has a hybrid identity till the time he returns from the villa due to his rejection of English culture. His Hybrid identity can be said to be an end result of a complex intermingling of the English culture as well as the Indian culture. He is not a colonial other as he has better skills and expertise than his English colleagues. His rejection and disillusionment with the Western culture at large makes him reject his hybrid identity.

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