



CULTRAL HYBRIDITY AND CULTRAL IDENTITY IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

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ABSTRACT

*This paper examines cultural hybridity and cultural identity experience in the postcolonial context in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Michael Ondaatje has been recognized for the complex mapping of postcolonial cultural hybridexperience. Cultural hybridity, identity and otherness entangled together form a novel entity. Sri Lankan origin Ondaatje represents a complex thematic linking of these issues; in fact, they can be seen as central preoccupations in his work. The hybrid experience that Ondaatje writes about is a contradictory one and it contains internal tensions.*

INTRODUCTION

The English Patient is a story of a badly burned man with an enigmatic identity. The story is sensuous, mysterious, and philosophically inspirational with tones of loss and sadness; 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 20-year-old Canadian nurse Hana, who has volunteered to stay behind to care for the unidentified burn patient and has grown wary 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

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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, also arrives at the villa to look for Hana. He is a thief with the thumbs cut off, searching for his identity, having to find himself again. The four of them gradually form a fragile community amid the war.

The story of the presumably English patient, who will be revealed as Ladislaus de Almásy, a Hungarian Count, unravels through narrated flashbacks of his desert explorations in the Libyan desert, Northern Africa. The tragedy of his injury is connected to his love affair with Katharine Clifton, a young wife of one of his fellow explorers of the British Geographical Society. The studied novel could be read as a postmodern text of fragmentary narration, with Ondaatje's trademark style of writing riddled with past memories and glimpses of vision, which allow for a historical perspective woven into the texture of the story. On the other hand, the past events place the present national and cultural conflicts into a postcolonial perspective. The themes of the novel and its narrative style are postmodern, and what is more, the novel is postmodern and postcolonial because it discusses the loss of the grand narratives of Western culture by questioning the validity of national distinctions, emphasizing cultural or geographical dislocation, and dealing with experiences of foreignness which can be considered postcolonial literary themes.

In Ondaatje's novel, the main characters have multiple cultural identities, for example vague national affiliations, and the novel challenges the notion of any original or purecultural identity. The central character is referred to as the English patient, although in fact, he is a Hungarian expatriate turned citizen of the world without one specific national identity and therefore he also embodies cultural hybridity. All characters experience their cultural identity as a fluctuating and fluid process. They fluctuate between many associations and express "the variousness of things" with the interconnectedness and mixedness of various cultural influences which constitute an unstable and continuously shifting state of cultural hybridity (Bush 1994, 248). Cultural identity is shaped and continually adjusted by cultural hybridity and its mixed cultural influences. The site of cultural hybridity is diffuse and it is continually shifted; fluid and without any clear borders. This fluidity creates tension connected to the cultural hybridity that the main characters face as anxiety. The present of the novel takes place in the spring of 1945, right before the end of WWII and Allied victory in May. *The English Patient* was published in 1992 and, in fact, it is historical fiction: decolonization and the collapse of the British Empire have taken place before the writing of the novel.

As a genre, postcolonial historical fiction shapes the reader's understanding of the past and challenges historical truth to suggest new ways of thinking of the past. Some of the themes, such as detailed accounts of Kip's meticulous appearance, could be read as

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belonging to the genre of historical fiction to provide a stark contrast to possibly negative and widely held racial prejudices of the period towards Indian immigrants in England. In the beginning of the novel, some detailed descriptions of Kip's arrival to military training show the shock and prejudice of the English who have never met a Sikh man with a turban. Cultural hybridity is a challenging term to define due to multiple meanings associated with both culture and the notion of hybridity. The term 'postcolonial cultural hybridity' provides a very broad frame of reference for different forms of cultural hybridity in the postcolonial context of the novel. According to Bhabha, cultural hybridity challenges cultural hierarchies: "Hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal. Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration. It makes possible the emergence of an 'interstitial' agency that refuses the binary representation" (Bhabha 1994, 34). This opposes Said 'categorization of cultures of East and West; in fact, Bhabha steps outside cultural binaries and hierarchies with his theory of cultural hybridity.

Hybridity is a result of a mixture, a message. Hybridity implies the simultaneous presence of different fragments; it is both and neither, in parts. Hybridity remains as a highly debated term in postcolonial theory, but in the postcolonial context, cultural hybridity generally refers to "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2000, 96). According to one formulation, "hybridity is the essence of the postcolonial self. It is made up of the prodigal and the foreigner in one.

In other words, a self inherited from its history and blood translated into a self-made self. The prodigal son is an apt metaphor for the relativity of the postcolonial point of view" (Ganapathy Dore 1994, 7). This definition of postcolonial hybridity mixes interestingly the essentialist view of identity with the discursive approach. Ondaatje writes about an ideal world, without any geographical or cultural borders, where hybridity reigns, and the theme of cultural hybridity is strongly portrayed in Bhabha evokes the concept of global citizenship or transnationalism by positing that, "The territoriality of the 'global citizen' is, concurrently, post national, denational or transnational" (Bhabha 2003, 30) and similarly to Ondaatje, he promotes cultural hybridity instead of clearly marked national identity with fixed borders.

The notion of transnationalism is portrayed in the same vein in *The English Patient* in connection to cultural hybridity and hybrid cultural identities. Nomadism is characterized by constant dislocation and the concept of 'displacement' can be understood as referring to "the separation of people from their native culture either through physical dislocation as refugees, immigrants, migrants, exiles, or expatriates or the colonizing imposition of a foreign culture" (Bammer 1994, xi). In the novel both national and cultural borders are diffuse and permeate. Nomadic cultural identities are formed as a result of constant geographical relocation and

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layers of hybridization. However, it is important to distinguish between the privileged nomadism of Western travellers and the forced dislocations of disadvantaged, most often non-Western, refugees due to war or some crisis situation.

The portrayal of the Sikh sapper Kirpal Singh, or Kip as he is addressed in familiar terms by the English, defies many stereotypes typically associated with representatives of colonized countries such as India: he is portrayed as a highly trained professional in a demanding position, self-sufficient and devoted to his craft, yet kind and courteous towards the Europeans and Canadians he shares the villa with, gallant in his demeanor. The construction of cultural identity can be an abrupt process. In the novel; characters are depicted in dramatic instances in which characters are altered or modified by their own actions or by those of others or by the surroundings, for example, in the scene where atomic bombing is depicted and its dramatic effect on Kip as he violently renounces his Western affiliations and leaves the villa. Similarly for Almásy, he is transformed from a man of few words to a mode of constant narration by the loss he suffered when Katharine Clifton died in the desert waiting for him to rescue her and his tragic plane crash when he was finally able to return to find her body in the Cave of Swimmers years later. Characters are examined in moments when alterations occur, and I read these as moments when their cultural hybridization takes place.

Another context of hybridization in the novel is the theme of dislocation. The importance and connection of individual and collective identities are emphasized in the context of modern globalisation where cultural and national borders disappear (Tötösyde Zepetnek 1999) In the context of WWII in the novel, the characters have been dislocated by the war. The meaning of dislocation in their case encompasses both physical and geographical dislocation as well as mental. In the novel, cultural and national borders disappear with characters that have multiple cultural identities due to their past; the patient has multiple national and cultural connections spanning from Hungary to the Levant, France, England and Libyan desert; Hana and Caravaggio are Canadians with a mixed background of immigration including Italy for Caravaggio's family, while Hana is a French-Canadian of Finnish and Slovenian origin (her family was already introduced in Ondaatje's previous novel *In the Skin of a Lion*, (1987) and Kip is a Sikh who immigrated from Punjab, India, to England to work in the British Royal Engineers.

Now he is in Italy defusing German bombs and "fighting English wars" (TEP122). Caravaggio aptly sums it up by saying, "The trouble with all of us is we are where we shouldn't be" (TEP122). As to his multiple cultural influences, Almásy spent time in "his childhood in the Levant", consisting of the Middle East of Cyprus, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Syria, but "went to school in England" (TEP165). Almásy views himself as someone who has created his own cultural and national identity. In his view, he has no national identity in the traditional sense; he is a citizen of an undefined nomad culture with

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his fellow desert explorers, including Madox and Bagnold, as he states, “We became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations” (*TEP138*). Madox is Almásy’s closest friend within the group of desert explorers and died shortly after his return to England in 1939 as protest of war when he “sat in the congregation of a church, heard the sermon in honour of war, pulled out his desert revolver and shot himself” (*TEP240*).

His death can be read as a silent gesture of opposition against nationalism. Almásy glorifies the desert life and his own construction of a self-defined cultural identity outside normative nationalities. However, he is one of the privileged in society; as Count Almásy he “embodies the ideals of an aristocratic, cosmopolitan world, which has the ability and privilege to move itself beyond nationality and identification” (Novak 2004, 218). Almásy prefers cultural hybridity and nomadism, and by doing this, he also criticizes nationalist thinking. Together with his companions they support the colonial cause of mapping and exploring the nations of Northern Africa to bring them into the realm of English influence at least in cultural terms. Libya, for example, was colonized by Italy and decolonized right after WWII. In the story of the novel, Hana has also acquired a nomadic cultural identity. She prefers “to be nomadic in the house” by inhabiting different locations, moving her hammock wherever she feels like sleeping according to her moods (*TEP13*).

This trope of nomadic identity is echoed later in the novel by Almásy’s recollection of the desert community he formed with other explorers and the Bedouin and the way they “disappeared into landscape” (*TEP139*). According to a non-essentialist view, cultural identity is shaped continuously and constructed as a process. In the novel, Almásy has undergone a dramatic change of identity, personal as well as cultural. Prior to the plane crash, when the plane he was flying “fell burning into desert” and he along with it burst in flames, Almásy was an independent adult white male with a strong affiliation with the English (*TEP5*). He was part of a European elite in Libya of the 1930’s, privileged to satisfy his desire of exploration and to indulge himself in a travelling lifestyle. At the present of the novel, he is a helpless invalid, totally dependent on others for mere survival, physically weak and fatally maimed. Therefore, he is entirely powerless and without any privileges, the vestiges of a white European man stripped off power and position.

The blackness of his skin – blackened to colour of aubergine by the oils of the Bedouin tribe that anointed him after the plane crash and fire – is juxtaposed to his supposed English nationality. This can be read as a criticism of Western racial stereotypes and, according to Eleanor Ty, challenges the normative colonial concepts of nation, identity and race (Ty 2000, 10), because he is presumed to be English and he no longer fulfils the cultural stereotype of a fully independent white European man.



The context of the story of the novel is the war situation which triggers experiences of dislocation when armies invade new territories and refugees are forced to leave their homes; they become dislocated without a homeland. In addition to this material loss during the war, national identities are also lost in mental terms due to disillusionment. The novel suggests that Hana is shellshocked and Hana has lost her faith in the cause of the war, for example, she has discarded her uniform: “Coming out of what had happened to her during the war, she drew her own few rules to herself. She would not be ordered again or carry out duties for the greater good. She would care only for the burned patient her only communication was with him” (TEP14). The characters are culturally dislocated or become so in the novel.

The four of them share the villa as their new homeland, and they are leaving old cultural identities behind as they are, according to the terminology used in the novel, “shedding skins” (TEP117), or ridding themselves of their old identities from their old lives before the war. They have grown wary of life and suffer from disillusionment: “They could imitate nothing but what they were. There was no defence but to look for the truth in others” (TEP117). In my reading of *The English Patient*, “shedding skins” means discarding disguises and characters are faced with the naked reality of things. Themes concerning ‘skin’ are closely connected to notions of identity in the novel; ‘like a second skin’ is, by definition, something intimately adapted and it therefore connotes close identification. Caravaggio tracked spies and their helpers in the desert, including Almásy, during the war.

After befriending the patient, he ponders if he could do the kindness of constructing a new identity for him: “Perhaps invent a skin for him, the way tannic acid camouflages a burned man’s rawness. Working in Cairo during the early days of the war, he had been trained to invent double agents or phantoms who would take flesh...spent weeks clothing [phantoms] with facts, giving them qualities of character” (TEP117). However, the reference to skin is most likely an instance of intertextuality with Ondaatje’s novel *In the Skin of the Lion* where Caravaggio also appears as one of the central characters. In her discussion of the migrant experience, Susan Spearey notes how in *In the Skin of a Lion* “the skins that each character wears can be seen as manifestations of various personalities and subject positions rather than disguises which serve to conceal as essential and predetermined character” (Spearey 1994, 52). In the story of the English patient, the narrative functions as his camouflage in this sense that it enables him to remain unidentified, as a comparable trope to ‘skin’, allowing him to assume alternative identities reminiscent of the spy identities Caravaggio created as cover stories. Almásy’s stories of English gardens and “flower beds in Gloucestershire” (TEP163) serve as a fake national background. Presumably, Almásy wants to avoid being identified as the desert guide for German spies that Caravaggio hunted during the war.

Skinning is also present as a positive trope of desire for unity in the novel: “Hana unskins plum with her teeth, withdraws the stone and passes the flesh of the fruit into his mouth. He

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whispers again, dragging the listening heart of the young nurse beside him to wherever his mind is, into that well of memory he kept plunging into during those months before he died” (TEP4). The construction of cultural identity can be read in the novel, for example, when Caravaggio is shocked to see the change in Hana from the girl he knew in Canada and how her identity has evolved during her war experiences: “What she was now was what she herself had decided to become” and he marvels “at her translation” (TEP222).

The idea of Hana’s identity as a translation fits well Hall’s view of identity. Hall’s theory of cultural identities asserts that they are acquired through processes that are “never completed - always ‘in process’” (Hall and Du Gay 1996, 2). There is a pattern in the novel concerning Hana’s identity construction. Kip envisions Hana in future years after the end of the war: She will, he realizes now, always have a serious face. She has moved from being a young woman into having the angular look of a queen, someone who has made her face with her desire to be a certain kind of person. He still likes that about her. Her smartness, the fact that she did not inherit that look or that beauty, but that it was something searched for and that it will always reflect a present stage of her character. (TEP300)

One interpretation of cultural identity construction is connected to the concept of nomadism. Nomadic identities and their culture of travelling, migration and translocation are idealized in *The English Patient*. Hana’s life as the nomad of the house is part of her resolution to make her own rules and to live free of any attachments to one place or cultural constructions: “Some nights she opened doors and slept in rooms that had walls missing” (TEP13) . As a contrast in practical terms to Almásy’s privileged idealization of nomadism to be free of cultural obligations or national restrictions. The rooms that had walls missing could be read to represent besides demolished architecture, and also hybridized cultural constructions outside normative structures.

The novel also depicts the nomadic cultural identities of the Bedouin nomads, the desert tribes of Bedouin, are people whose land continually shifts shape. Almásy recalls his rescue by the Bedouin after his plane crashed and burned in a blaze, and how he “[stood] up naked out of it. The leather helmet on my head in flames” (TEP5). Their nomadic wisdom and civilisation saved him: “They poured oil onto large pieces of soft cloth and placed them on him. He was anointed” (TEP6). The Bedouin have reputed medicinal skills covering even cure for severe burn wounds: “Ground peacock bone...the most potent healer of skin” (TEP10). This passage, also present in the 1996 film by Anthony Minghell, has been criticized for its orientalism and “stereotypical portrayal of the Bedouins as backward practitioners of witch-medicine” (Morgan 1998, 165).

Almásy praises the Bedouin who inhabit the Libyan desert without reserve and admires their land without borders. For him, the Libyan desert is a glorious antithesis of a nation-state

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which has no boundaries. Bhabha also defends the representation of cultural otherness on equal terms outside of colonial stereotypes (Bhabha 1994, 64), and I read his theory as a support to my argument of the resourceful practicality of the Bedouin medicinal skills.

Bhabha presents the notion of a nationality that is very similar to the one that the English patient narrates. For both, nationality is something contiguous, citizenship is global but without solid borders. The group of desert explorers that Almásy and Madox, his most trusted friend and a fellow desert explorer, are part of, are the "nomads of faith" of desert (*TEP*139), their land is without shape or borders. However, their nomadism is one of privilege, as noted earlier, and must be evaluated separately from the forced dislocations of refugees. Bhabha theorises that instead of stable or permanent nature of national identities, cultural and national identities are in a continuous process of transition. Bhabha does not differentiate between the voluntary or forced processes of transition, and this can be read as a valid point of criticism of his theory. He also postulates that the interconnectedness of our cultural identities should be emphasized with the notion of global citizenship rather than one solid national identity (Bhabha 2003, 31).

In reality, the vast area of the Libyan desert is divided into tribal lands, and there are active routes of commerce crisscrossing it. Therefore, it is not empty land without culture or civilisation. Almásy has himself noted the medicinal skills of the Bedouin, and lauds the lost era of water people and the Cave of Swimmers. It remains unclear why Almásy extols the desert, is it because desert nations are not visible in the European maps of the time? Perhaps it is because for desert nomads, there is no value in where you were originally from, and the Hungarian Almásy merely feels the urge to evade European cultural categorization and construct the cultural identity he desires, possibly an English cultural identity. This reading follows the same pattern as Hana's analysed above using Hall's discursive approach to identity construction through narrative.

Almásy has initially come to the Libyan desert to explore and map it which could be read as a remnant of Western colonial conquest of foreign lands and cultures by mapping, naming, and categorizing. The next level of colonial cultural conquest would involve establishment of cultural hierarchies. While this never materializes in the course of the novel, the question remains what were the final intentions of the European desert exploration missions of the members of the British Geographical Society. When the war erupts, the tranquil oasis of the desert life is brutally disrupted when the different armies and spies invade the desert: it becomes an active stage of war where even the desert tribes are split into camps, forced to take sides and form alliances and became enemies. This forced split to opposing camps can be read as a critique of the European presence in the lands of the desert tribes. Almásy is grieved: "Everywhere there was war. Suddenly there were "teams". The Bermanns, the Bagnolds his former fellow desert explorer, the Slatin Pashas - who had at various times

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saved each other's lives - had now split into camps" (TEP168). From the perspective of postcolonial literary criticism, the Western nations dominated and abused the desert civilisations, however, Almásy seems oblivious to moral implications of his own part. He idealizes the nomad life and culture but, on the other hand, he is indifferent to the effect of the European presence in the lives of the local tribes.

He turns a blind eye to child abuse by Fenelon-Burnes, one his fellow desert explorers, an Englishman who kept a small Arab girl tied up to his bed. The novel shies away from taking a political stance that the postcolonial approach generally requires. Some critics, such as Mukherjee, have reproached Ondaatje's writing for its political neutrality despite the postcolonial literary themes he discusses (Mukherjee 1988; Mukherjee 1998). According to the view presented in the novel, cultural identity is adaptable. The boundary virtually separating self and other is a fluid one; a view not based on formal ties of nation, family, or society, but one which responds to the concerns of the moment, to the necessities of circumstance. In a rather elegiac passage after the death of Katharine, the English patient remarks: "We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves....We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience" (TEP261). The novel states that the construction of cultural identity is a continuous process influenced by many different sources.

Colonial cultural stereotypes are displaced and disrupted by multiple themes in the novel, such as the manners, appearances and attitudes of the central characters. The Sikh sapper, Kip, is a highly trained professional, which already challenges the stereotype of the colonized Indians as low skilled manual workers. Furthermore, Kip is an engineer, an expert in bomb disposal and therefore part of an elite. The act of defusing a bomb is narrated from Kip's mind through focalisation which makes him gain agency in the eyes of the reader. As an expert in the British Intelligence, he challenges the cultural otherness of the postcolonial situation in several ways. These professional qualities of Kip question the stereotypes created in the West of the colonized. Kip is the only one of the four at the villa who still wears a uniform at the end of WWII but when war is still ongoing, and therefore more the Westener in his conduct according to the colonial stereotype than the actual Europeans or North Americans. Kip uses a set of crystal earphones to stay up to date with all that is going on in the world when he is defusing a bomb. He is continually focused with all his wit and knowledge on the mission at hand, a true researcher of the art of hidden weaponry.

When Hana observes Kip's habits through binoculars, she notes how he handles his gear with expertise and effortless flow. From the postcolonial perspective, this is an instance where the Western cultural stereotype would assume an Indian—albeit a trained engineer and a Sikh who

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are renowned for their technical abilities—would not be capable of taking control of the situation and stay in command under extreme stress. The colonial culture fantasized of a “reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha 1994, 86). Kip’s character challenges further the Western stereotype of the professional capacity of the people of the formerly colonized countries opposed to the English engineering skills because his engineering skills are presented in connection to his Sikh culture of origin and therefore his professional skills are not the result of Westernization or cultural assimilation.

The postmodern narrative paradoxically inscribes and contests tropes of cultural recognition and representation. This postmodern theme can be read in dislocation of cultural otherness. An instance of double dislocation of cultural otherness is shown when Caravaggio briefly talks to Kip in a false Welsh accent, “The English patient wants to see you, boyo”, and when Kip retorts “Okay, boyo” with an additional Indian twist (*TEP201*). In this scene, the racial other is not stereotyped. This could be read as cultural otherness mixed and layered which suggests a complex hybridization process. Cultural hybridity is formed through a hybridization process. The hybrid experience in the novel is more an ongoing process rather than a static result, and this is one of the ways Ondaatje departs from mere postcolonial literature of resistance (Cook 2004).

In his reading of the novel, Simpson points out that Kip challenges the colonial racial stereotypes in several ways. In fact, Kip could be read as an Indian version of Rudyard Kipling’s character Kim: Kip arrives at the villa after Hana has been reading Kim, and his English nickname echoes both Kim and Kipling. Kim is an Irish character which creates a contrast to Kip’s Indian background, and also shows different projections of racial stereotypes of different eras (Simpson 1994, 220).

Kipling’s story centres around “claims of opposed [Indian and British] cultures as father-quest, a narrative of cultural and political development” (Shin 2007, 215). The set up is dislocated in Ondaatje’s novel when Hana observes “it seemed to her a reversal of Kim. The young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English”, as she watched Kip sit beside the English patient: now the wise teacher is English, the young student is Indian and Hana is the young boy, which also reverses gender stereotypes (*TEP111*).

The postcolonial perspective is addressed in both novels together with different projections of cultural otherness. Ondaatje reiterates the story of Kim with Kip’s postcolonial rejection of Western dominant culture and return to his home and family in India and its independence from British rule. Equally for Hana, her return to Canada can be read as a metaphor of separation from the former colonial rule of England and about the way the different colonies have won their independence.



Challenging a stereotype of colonized peoples, Hana asserts that Kip would never desert his post because he is a civilized man, more English in attitude than Caravaggio or Almásy. In the novel, Kip's separation from the others is stressed in his "self-sufficiency" (TEP73). The novel questions racial otherness and national identity in the ways cultural otherness is deliberately displaced or presented from a point of view that challenges stereotypes, through characterization, ideologically disruptive images, through exotic scenery, and through structure (Ty 2000, 10). In the novel, Kip's character explicitly challenges cultural and racial stereotypes: colonial otherness is reversed in instances where Kip studies Europeans with his rifle telescope as if part of a scientific approach with a microscope and as an act of domination. He "looks back" at the cultural representatives of the Westerners, by using their technology and by adopting their techniques.

The Westerners are now the object of Kip's gaze through his rifle telescope and he is in a position of power through the potential use of violence. The stereotypes are also reversed because the representatives of the West are depicted as wounded wrecks. The white males, the Westerners Almásy and Caravaggio, are disempowered, maimed, and ripped of their physical strength and social stature, whereas Kip is in uniform and portrayed as an expert which suggests he is in control, ordered and organized.

This reversal could be read as lack of agency of Westerners. Ondaatje challenges colonial cultural presumptions, or "pattern of empire", in the novel, by both unwriting and confirming Western cultural signs (Simpson 1994, 227). These themes will be explored in more detail in the next subchapters concerning cultural hybridity. The next subchapter will evaluate the abusive acts of the Western world.

In the novel, the theme of cultural hybridity is closely associated with a pattern of movement and transformation; characters acquire their cultural hybridity through experiences that have a deep impact on them; they are transformed by the surroundings, language, narration, and cultural influences. Almásy narrates the process of leaving civilization and entering the 'sea-state' during "the first two days of a trek out [to desert], when he was in the zone of limbo between city and plateau. After six days...he was moving in ancient time, had adapted into the breathing patterns of deep water" (TEP246). The transformation is complete when he was located in "that pure zone between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller" (TEP246). In these moments "he was alone, his own invention. He knew during these times how the mirage worked, the fata morgana, for he was within it" (TEP246). Almásy's hybridization process is closely connected to the influence of the surroundings, and the desert can be read as a no-man's-land outside cultural territories like the third space. However, this reading ignores the desert tribes and their cultural territories, and is therefore only partly valid.



To initiate his hybridization process, Kip accesses Western culture through works of art that influence his perception of the West and its cultural images; he is hybridized while acquiring a deep appreciation of Western art: in Naples, his fate seems to be weighed by a pair of statues of Annunciation to Mary, and a religious theme of cultural pilgrimage is suggested by the use of such imagery as “the tableau now, with Kip at the feet of the two figures, suggests a debate over his fate. The raised terracotta arm a stay of execution, a promise of some great future for this sleeper, childlike, foreignborn” (*TEP281*). The choice of words in this passage could be read as suggesting that Kip will be roused from his sleep to some grand mission as a “childlike, foreignborn” subject of the West and its culture. The passage can be read in both positive and negative terms; it can be read as a positive praise of Kip’s future potential, while it also suggests that he is a “childlike” foreigner which denigrates him. I read it as a critical metaphor of Westernization: the colonial subjects are rewarded, but still subjugated to Western cultural hegemony and its stereotypes.

Therefore, this hybridization process does not evade colonial cultural hierarchies according to the requirements of the third space, and Kip’s hybridization is incomplete and fragmentary. It can be concluded that cultural hybridity is acquired through a process of hybridization which varies for different characters; for Almásy, the desert helps him to acquire a nomadic cultural identity; for Kip, the Western art functions as a gateway to a partial hybridization experience. The exact phases of the hybridization process are not explicitly expressed in the novel; rather, it is a metaphor for gaining sensitiveness, responsiveness, and cultural insight. When Kip first arrives in England, he is a stranger to English culture: “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” (*TEP187*). His encounter with the English culture was rough: “The English! They expect you to fight for them but won’t talk to you” (*TEP188*). Kip is delighted of the possibility of community or unity when Lord Suffolk welcomes Kip, as if he was a family member, a “Sprodigal returned, offered a chair at the table, embraced with conversations” (*TEP189*). In this setting, Lord Suffolk is not only a professional tutor but also a father figure and even a godfather of foreign English culture: “Lord Suffolk chatted about the migration of robins from the war zones of Europe, the history of bomb disposal, Devon cream. He was introducing the customs of England to the young Sikh as if it was a recently discovered culture” (*TEP184*). This friendly approach surprises Kip who suffers from the cultural distance with other Englishmen, and he even felt as if the secretary Miss Morden was staring at him in the waiting room at bomb disposal unit’s office because he was the only Indian among applicants. In fact, Miss Morden’s stern look turned out to be one of approval and encouragement, and she tells him later: “I was sure you would be chosen” (*TEP189*).

Lord Suffolk and Miss Morden helped Kip become an initiate of English culture and to take the first steps towards gradual cultural hybridity in the hybridization process. I do not read



Kip's hybridization as Westernization because he does not discard his cultural values or change his demeanour. The difference is visible in comparison to Almásy who embraces the desert and nomadic cultural identity. This process is different for the other characters; In his repressed desire for unity, Almásy yearns to possess Katharine Clifton.

These events have taken place prior to Almásy's burn injuries and the present events, and even though Katharine is not physically present at the villa, her spirit comes alive through Almásy's endless narration. The news of their affair had reached slowly Katharine's husband Geoffrey Clifton, a desert explorer and a spy for British intelligence, although the affair had already ended. On a tragic murder-suicide mission, Geoffrey Clifton tried to kill all three of them by crashing his plane and Katharine as passenger into Almásy waiting for them at the isolated desert plateau of Gilf Kebir. Almásy was forced to leave wounded Katharine behind in a desert cave and fetch for help. To his great tragedy, Almásy was arrested by the Allies on suspicion to be a German spy upon his arrival to the desert town of El Taj which sealed Katharine's fate.

Almásy claims to abhor "ownership" in love: "When you leave me, forget me" (TEP152) he says to her, but despite his convictions, he desires to possess Katharine, and is obsessed by "that hollow at the base of a woman's neck" (TEP162) which is called "the vascular sizzod" (TEP241). He thinks about their relationship after they had ended the affair, if their love story was born out of "desire of another life" (TEP239). They were worlds apart: "She had always wanted words, she loved them... Whereas I thought words bent emotions like sticks in water" (TEP239). There are elements of violence in their sexual relationship, and Katharine recalls dreams of "hands at her neck and waited for the mood of calmness between them to swerve to violence" (TEP150). This could be read as extreme desire for unity with strong sexual connotations. Further, when he is finally able to return years later to the Cave of Swimmers to find Katharine's body, there is a disturbing suggestion of an act of intimacy with a corpse, as Almásy tells: "I approached her naked as I would have done in our South Cairo room, wanting to undress her, still wanting to love her" (TEP170). Despite his claims to be emotionally unattached, his self-sufficiency and his fear and hate of ownership, Almásy tragically realizes his desire to be united with Katharine only after her death in the Cave of Swimmers. Desiring to return to Katharine and the Cave of Swimmers, Almásy sides with the Germans and turns into an "English spy" (TEP165) who "guided Eppler through the desert into Cairo on Rommel's personal orders" (TEP164). Almásy unwittingly assaults British national security and severs his allegiance with the English, his close cultural affiliation. Caravaggio reveals Almásy's false judgment to him, "you had become the enemy not when you sided with Germany but when you began your affair with Katharine Clifton" (TEP255). This accentuates Almásy's loss of unity with the cultural community of English desert explorers, a loss that led him to his tragic fate.



The novel addresses different desires to form a community, to establish cultural connections, personal relationships or even drug addiction: these are all imagined communities, in a sense, and could be read as dreams of unity, love, and desire. into the room” (Wachtel 1999, 253). In a dramatic scene full of anxiety, she defies the threat of hidden explosives: dignified and ready to face her fate, Hana starts to play a slow and tentative dance of death; danse macabre, to lure in death. This menacing scene is disrupted when the two sappers, Kip and Hardy, walk in. She did not lure in death but her salvation, and the moment of anxiety passes in this scene. Postcolonial and postmodern cultural theories promote the idea of dissolution of clear cultural boundaries; a world without nations. It is the fulfilment of Almásy’s dream “to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation” (TEP139). In the postcolonial situation, the dissolution of traditional cultural boundaries leaves behind cultural insecurity and instability. In such a situation where the cultural boundaries are of little importance, and where the foundations of essentialist cultural identity are eradicated with the erasing of the importance of a shared origin, the experience of cultural ambiguity may cause anxiety. The indeterminate and diffuse nature of cultural hybridity is characterised by vagueness which leads to feeling of anxiety.

This postcolonial and postmodern eradication of traditional cultural boundaries and absence of cultural attachment or any solid point of reference for one’s cultural identity accentuates the experience of dismay in the situation. Cultural hybridity is also something dubious due to any clear identification or allegiance. It is presented as something suspect in Almásy’s tragedy leading to his demise; he cannot claim Englishness because he does not fit neatly into national or cultural categories. The tragedy was that Katharine died because of Almásy’s foreign name. He was “just another international bastard” (TEP251) to the English military at El Taj that he tried to persuade to rescue the injured Katharine from the desert; he was suspect due to his foreign, non-English name when the war broke out. The “multiple sites of belonging” or the multiple cultural identities of characters cause contradictions with dissolution of boundaries. The war situation in the novel is exigent in demanding clear national allegiances and national borders that are, together with nationalities, of utmost importance. Cultural hybridity was therefore a disastrous disadvantage for Almásy and the greatest cause of anxiety that determined his tragic fate of losing Katharine. Also Hana suffers the consequences of cultural hybridization which is hinted at when she “has not found her own company, the ones she wanted” in life as she is depicted years later in her life in Canada”(TEP301), possibly due to cultural hybridization by the events that have made her too dissimilar to blend in culturally or to be united with similar cultural hybrid identities. In Hana’s future, the mixedness of her cultural identity results in absence of unity and therefore to anxiety of hybridity. The villa was a place of gradual healing to the characters, and therefore, the future absence of unity is not due to the war trauma alone.



Other characters are similarly confronted with acute anxiety of hybridity when the situations reach a climax. Kip rejects his cultural hybridity when the atomic bombs are dropped in Japan by the Allied forces: "If he closes his eyes he sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadow of humans suddenly in the air. This tremor of Western wisdom" (TEP284). He can no longer side with the Western culture or the small community of its cultural representatives at the Italian villa.

Kip was in the process of slowly becoming assimilated into the Western cultural sphere; however, it was the brutality of the bombing of a non-western nation that made him see the situation in the light of harsh reality the atomic bomb could have never been dropped on a white nation. Their cultures were not considered equal, the Western hegemony was based on a hierarchy which claimed the right to annihilate the lives of the civilians of the other, supposedly inferior, cultures. Kip's anger at his adapted cultural world of the West results in his realization of "seeing everything...in a different light" (TEP284). According to critics, this scene in the novel unveils the false pretence of the West's "cultural myth, the narrative of western sacrifice, heroism, and ultimate triumph" in WWII (Hawkins and Danielson 2002, 139). Kip is devastated and disillusioned by the news which is in stark contrast to what he considered earlier in connection to his craft and how "successful defusing of a bomb ended novels. Wise white fatherly men shook hands, were acknowledged, and limped away" (TEP105). In taking this moral stance, Ondaatje exposes the contradictions of the Western discourse of superior morality and the complexity of the situation as well as Western guilt concerning the bombings (Hawkins and Danielson 2002, 151). I read this as postcolonial cultural criticism on Ondaatje's part, as the novel was written decades after the end of the war. In doing this, he highlights the postcolonial theme of decline of colonial power and cultural influence of the West.

After the news of the bombing, Kip rejects the West: "Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers...Never shake hands with them" (TEP284). He rejects the colonial power position of the West and targets the English patient with his rifle in a reversed, violent reassertion of power: "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" (TEP283). In his anger, Kip disregards the fact that Almásy is not English, and he sees the patient as a representative of the colonizers, the English, and the West. He renounces the totality of Western civilization, and in his view, WWII was one of "Barbarians versus the Barbarians" in the English patient's words (TEP257), declaring he is "no longer their sentinel" (TEP286). He also rejects his friends at the villa although they are equally appalled by the news; in Caravaggio's words: "A new war. The death of a civilization" (TEP286).



This scene re-establishes cultural unity of postcolonial alterity of the self/other axis that characters have sought to evade.

Kip leaves the villa fueled by anger at the Western culture and its racist stereotypes. He strongly rejects the racial otherness projected by the West and the Allied "bombing the brown races of the world" (TEP286). Kip's rage is justified by the acute realization that this attack is directed at racial others including himself, and "never on a white nation" (TEP286) would such atrocity be legitimized by the Westerners. His fury is mixed with disappointment at his deception, and not seeing people like him were "not quite/not white", meaning the denigration of the non-white people, to quote Bhabha, from Western point of view (1994, 92).

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