

Dissociating Traumatic Self : A Psychoanalytic Reading of Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

Arun Babu

In Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, identity is reconstructed among four characters who are avoiding many lost aspects of their previous lives in an Italian villa during World War II. They need to escape the trauma created, their old identities, names, bodies, and places to begin anew. The reconstruction of identity takes place, regardless of the characters' attempts to escape separate versions of their identities. The novel is mostly about resisting the Eurocentric view of the world, focusing on human relationships and human resilience. Eventually, after the bombs are dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the English patient is assumed by the reader to die in the Italian villa. The surviving characters Kip, Hana, and Caravaggio decide to return to the countries where they were born, where they feel that they belong. This gives one explanation of how the reconstruction of identity takes place, regardless of the characters' attempts to escape separate versions of their identities. The four characters have different reasons why their lives have led to the San Girolamo Villa, they are linked through World War II and their experience with trauma. According to Lois Tyson "individual identity and its cultural milieu inhabit, reflect, and define each other. Their relationship is mutually constitutive and dynamically unstable" (280). Creation of identity relies on culture as well as individual will and desire. In a sense, a complete individual self does not exist, because a subject's identity is reconstructed through a collage of names, stereotypes, body image, the imagination, memories, relationships, environment, books, and "history."

The chaos of the war still operates through trauma in the characters themselves. As a result of their experience with World War II, Kip, Hana, Caravaggio, and the English patient all have endured great trauma. The characters find that it is easier to escape their trauma than to face it. In the beginning of the novel the characters are not mentally or physically capable of facing their lost selves, loved ones, innocence, youth, worth, or honour. The characters' identities are being shaped and reshaped by their attempts to escape from their names, their bodies, and their environment. However, it does not matter how deeply the characters bury their trauma, because it resurfaces due to real events, such as the catastrophic explosions of two nuclear weapons on Japan. After leaving the villa, Kip, Hana, and Caravaggio all remember and yearn for the time that they spent together in Italy but accept and are satisfied with their choice to leave it. While in Italy, it is clear that all four characters try to save, learn from, and attach to one another in a time of war, when they are defeated in every possible way; they have lost family, lovers, friends, their innocence, a sense of usefulness, body parts, their confidence, security, youth, a trust in nations, children, ignorance, and/or their lives.

In an interview, Ondaatje states that "there are a lot of international bastards roaming around the world today. That's one of the book's main stories. Those migrants don't belong here but want to belong here" (Wachtel 257). The characters in the novel become refugees and attempt to escape their names/labels, bodies, and environment in order to belong in the villa that becomes their temporary residence. Kip, Hana,

Caravaggio, and the English patient express a need to escape the limitations of their names or labels because such tags usually do not change throughout their lives, no matter what the character experiences, while an identity is constantly altered through experiences. The four characters' traumatic war experiences alter their identities through decisions, events, sights, sounds, and pain. The characters provide examples of what Elizabeth A. Waites describes as "individuals who repeatedly experience alterations in self-experience, for example, sometimes [they] begin constructing their identity over and over until the pattern of their life resembles a patchwork mosaic" (21). Because of World War II the characters are experiencing, significant and traumatic events that cannot be limited or properly represented by a name or label, because identity changes with every moment.

Characters' body images in Ondaatje's text are just as inconsistent as their names and labels. A physical body is reconstructed by a person's mind and point of view. Although the body is influenced by materiality, the body in the novel is not a reflection of materials or reality, even though *The English Patient* claims that "a novel is a mirror walking down the road" (91). Just as the characters unsuccessfully reject their names, and fail at forming single, unrealizable identities because they change constantly, they also continuously reconstruct their bodies, forming components of their identities. The body provides a way of labeling identity from a physical perspective that is experienced through the five senses: image, scent, touch, smell, and sound. Therefore, the characters in the novel cannot help but utilize their bodies as they try to reconstruct new identities.

The war has affected all of the characters, physically as well as mentally. The weathering of Hana's body is noticed often by the men, particularly Caravaggio, who knew Hana before the war and has a frame of reference to compare her old to her new body image: "Her face became tougher and leaner, the face Caravaggio would meet later. She was thin, mostly from tiredness" (50). Due to Caravaggio's history with Hana as a child, he considers her change to be a negative one. However, Kip's perspective on Hana's bodily transition is 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" (301). Kip's and Caravaggio's observations of how Hana's body changes in the short time that they reside together in the villa forms the basis for how they inaccurately "see" her identity.

In *The English Patient*, the reconstruction of identity is affected by places, such as nations, the villa, and the desert. A place is not only described by setting, but also by time, such as World War II, which displays imaginary boundaries that emphasize the importance of "national identities." World War II itself becomes the antagonist of the novel because Hana, Kip, Caravaggio, and the English patient are all at odds with the war in one way or another, regardless of their side, Allies or Axis. Places, like the desert, villa, and the arenas of war are used as an escape or a reason to escape. Place is not something that can be truly owned, closed, or pinned down, contrary to what national boundaries propose. Places, Ondaatje suggests, continue to change throughout time and will outlast the life of their "owner." Ultimately the characters find out that they cannot completely escape into places or from the places where they belong. The English patient dies in the villa and those who survive leave Italy and the war to

return home. Characters draw upon places from their past and present to develop relationships that contribute to their evolving identities as they try to escape from their trauma. As Kateryna Longley observes :

space and spatiality are key terms for postcolonial studies [...] because the postcolonial condition is commonly one of reconstructing one's way of belonging in a particular place, either a familiar place that has undergone radical change as a result of its colonial past (or present) or a new and alien place where one seeks refuge" (8).

The English patient knows how to find his way through the shifting sands and how to find a buried plane without signs to guide him because he is familiar with the place, war trauma and "Otherness". While location is used as a means of escape by the four main characters, place is also what they are escaping from: the battlegrounds of World War II, the boundaries of nations, and the idea of what the "world" represents all limit and traumatize the characters significantly. War is not portrayed as leading to a victorious outcome in the novel, even though three out of the four characters have worked for the "winning" Allies. Although Kip, Hana, and Caravaggio aligned themselves with the Allies, a political and national debate switches to a racial one when the bombs are dropped on Japan. Instead of experiencing triumph, Hana, Caravaggio, and the English patient are ashamed, and Kip becomes angry at the actions of the Allies. Caravaggio admits that he "knows the young soldier [Kip] is right. They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation" (286).

At the end of *The English Patient*, Kip, who "looks condemned, separate from the world, his brown face weeping" (283), after hearing on the radio about the dropping of the bombs, blames the English patient: "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" (283). Kip is directly acknowledging the ability of white nations to impose their Eurocentrism upon the world. Up until the news of the bombs, Kip has been satisfied living in Europe with three members of white nations. The dropping of the atomic bombs, which killed approximately 140,000 people, many of whom were civilians, emphasizes the hierarchy of worth placed upon certain nations. Kip's interpretation of dropping the bombs is one that has usually been ignored throughout "history" due to its origin in "otherness," but in this instance, his personal disgust for those who feed elitism becomes evident to him: "People think a bomb is a mechanical object, a mechanical enemy. But you have to consider that somebody made it" (192). Kip blames the dropping of the bombs on Europe and all affiliated nations. Kip transfers his anger and vengeance to the English patient and tells the English patient:

My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them. [...]. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman. You had King Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English. (284-6)

All four characters were part of a war that has contaminated the land with disease, blood, hate, and prejudice. None of them are completely innocent and none of them can

forget what they saw. However, the fact that the characters are experiencing the horrors of the war together has helped them cope with the trauma. They have become a community, dependent on each other's company. Elizabeth A Waites states :

"[...] when a danger is commonly shared, those who share it sometimes escape the devastating sense of social isolation that so often magnifies trauma... Even extremely painful or life-threatening experiences, for example, mean something different when they are socially typical and shared or even valued by the general community" (31).

Caravaggio would agree with Waites because while he wishes to escape the war, he does not wish to separate from the other characters, particularly Hana. The community that shares a traumatic experience in the novel changes its meaning by condemning the war together. For instance, Hana, Kip, Caravaggio, and the English patient are residing in an unfamiliar place and are all adjusting to the weather, food, and the overall way of life during a war, on top of their traumatic experience.

Even if they are all experiencing trauma together about the same thing - the war - they each are experiencing different types and levels of intensity of trauma because each has a different social status and personal "history". Homi Bhabha focuses on the obligations of critics and readers to acknowledge perspectives of "others" when reading literature: "For the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the un-spoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present" (Bhabha 147). History does not represent the trauma that Kip and the English patient have endured during the war as being equal to the trauma of those who feel they belong to the Allies, like Caravaggio and Hana. The English patient informs Hana, "Kip and I are both international bastards – born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives" (Ondaatje 176). Kip and the English patient do not feel as if they belong anywhere because both are "othered" by race and/or politics.

However, it is not just race and culture that have silenced the experience of trauma in history. Hana's account of trauma may be overlooked by historians because she is female and has fought death in a hospital, instead of with men on battlefields. Even though Hana's efforts have been of great significance in the war, she does not sacrifice in the same way that the men do. For example, her experience with an abortion during the war is not something that the other three men could possibly relate to physically or emotionally. Hana's unborn child is described as being lost and killed, before she acknowledges that the pregnancy was aborted: "I lost the child. I mean, I had to lose it. The father was already dead. There was a war" (82). Hana sacrificed her child, who would have provided her with a possible surviving, intimate relationship following the death of both her lover and her father: "In my head. I was talking to him [the child]. I was a little crazy" (82).

The trauma that the characters have endured has caused them to feel useless to the outside "world," unable to adapt to what is to come. Caravaggio is more than mentally and physically handicapped by the war: the "war has unbalanced [Caravaggio] and he can return to no other world as he is, wearing these false limbs that morphine promises" (116). The "world" war has handicapped Caravaggio. He can no longer

steal what he needs without thumbs or nerve, and he has developed a dependency on morphine as a result of his injuries. While he is on morphine, which he shares with the suffering English patient, Caravaggio is described as becoming numb to the “world.” The time at war has made a very independent man dependent on morphine and on three other characters residing in the Villa San Girolamo.

The war has managed to tear many people apart, but has brought Kip, Hana, Caravaggio, and the English patient together in a decrepit villa in Italy, just north of Florence in Tuscany. The villa becomes an important character in the novel, disturbed by the war, just as Hana, Kip, Caravaggio, and the English patient have been. The Villa San Girolamo also shows many phases of its existence by having had many different names and identities reconstructed throughout its history, based on its various uses. The characters discuss its uncertain history by claiming that it used to house famous artists and was known as the Villa Briscoli, and that it once served as a nunnery that “housed hundreds of troops” (12) while the German army attacked, and that it became a war hospital for the Allies. Finally, the villa becomes a place of escape for Hana, Kip, Caravaggio, and the English patient, a place where they can temporarily forget where they have travelled, what they have seen, and who they once were.

The villa represents neither the world nor the characters’ home; it is just somewhere where they can temporarily deny and escape their problems. It is simple, secure, and solitary. They are not faced with questions about what went on during the war that returning home would prompt, nor do they have to perform the social etiquette that they left behind for the war. Instead, they sit in silence, play the piano, think, and read to escape the war and their home. As one postcolonial theorist states about such spaces: “In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (Bhabha 141). Even though the characters are satisfied being separate from the “world” and less disoriented than when they first arrived at the villa, the characters know that their stay is only temporary. Kip, who eventually clears the land of bombs, does not expect to make his tent outside somewhere to grow old: “The landscape around [Kip] is just a temporary thing, there is no permanence to it” (86-7).

The characters discuss what the end of the war means for them and where they will go afterwards: “When the war with Japan is over, everyone will finally go home. Kip said. ‘And where will you go?’ Caravaggio asked. The sapper rolled his head, half nodding, half shaking it, his mouth smiling” (269). Before the dropping of the bombs, Kip and the other three characters are unsure as to where, if anywhere, is home, the place that they belong. The beauty of residing in the villa is it is a sanctuary that has no rules or expectations for the future. They can just exist; and, for now, existing is enough. However, even though the characters are using both their homes and the villa to escape their trauma, both play a part in the reconstruction of identity. Hana’s trauma of cultural displacement during World War II has caused her to lose her stable identity and her Canadian home. Homi Bhabha states that, “To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and the public spheres” (141). While Hana does not wish to return home early in the novel, she does not belong in Italy either. Her “unhomeliness”

is spawned from her experience with the war and from her disagreement with the waste of soldiers' lives.

Although the characters focus on the current events of the war at the end of the novel, this is not to say that books are entirely disregarded. Hana and Caravaggio plan to bury everything that once belonged to the war with the English patient when he dies: "The body, the sheets, his clothes, the rifle" (286). They will bury everything except the English patient's commonplace book, because otherwise his name will be forgotten, his body will disintegrate, and nations will stop searching for him. The jumbled pages of constantly changing thoughts, ideas, pictures, maps, feelings, lies, imagination, fears, and memories, which are all pasted on top of a foundation of Herodotus's *Histories*, are the best representation and preserver of his unstable identity and history. The English patient considers the desert a place where he can escape from the "world." Kristina Kyser suggests, "It is in the desert that Almásy becomes 'nationless'" (4). The English patient is against possession of objects, land, and people, and is against what it means to possess or be possessed by nationality: "There is God only in the desert, he wanted to acknowledge that now. Outside of this there was just trade and power, money and war. Financial and military despots shaped the world" (250). The English patient refers to the *fata morgana*, a mirage, as a place outside of the "world." Robert Clark points out, "He seeks fertility in desert places. He is ... opposed to the very notion: law, property, names, identities, designations, maps" (65). The English patient is much happier and more secure in escaping nations by disappearing into the desert:

The place [in the desert where the English patient and colleagues] had chosen to come to, to be their best selves, to be unconscious of ancestry. [The English patient] knew during these times how the mirage worked, the *fata morgana*, for he was within it (246).

The characters in *The English Patient* use various places, like the desert, to escape their current mental and physical state. They attempt to reconstruct single identities that cannot exist, but instead achieve some mental stability that allows them to eventually leave the villa. However, the many places of the war, the villa, the library, and the desert, are only temporary escapes. All four of the characters plan to leave or actually leave the villa at the end of the novel: Kip returns to India and becomes a doctor, Hana plans to return to Canada to her stepmother, Caravaggio also returns to Canada, assumedly with Hana, and the English patient eventually dies. Even though they attempt to escape the connotations and experiences of the places in which they have lived or are living, they cannot. Ondaatje has revealed in an interview that "one of the things that [he] discovered in the book was that [he] thought that this was an Eden, an escape, a little cul-de-sac during the war, and this was where healing began. Then, with the news of other bombs, suddenly this became, perhaps, the last Eden" (Wachtel 252). The jolt back into reality ends Ondaatje's characters' imaginative and nostalgic escape from the "world" and eliminates the idea of a possible nonrestrictive Eden. Instead they choose to return to the places in which they feel that they most belong, where they are received without prejudice or violence, a place they once called home.

World War II, which has employed all four characters, has ended. There is no reason for them to remain in Italy and there will soon be nowhere for them to live because the villa name has been slowly deteriorating. The characters have escaped the reality of war and the trauma and now they must face its effects on them. The characters realize that they belong with family or friends, in places that they once called home. The characters' identity reconstruction is not hindered by their return to their nations of birth, but home offers the surviving characters a future, opposed to the limbo of the villa at the end of World War II. Instead of wasting away in a broken villa, Kip becomes a doctor and raises a family, while Hana and Caravaggio return to Canada. Unfortunately, the English patient's death occurs in the Italian villa. However, all four characters have evolved dramatically through the impact of the war and their relationships with each other. The surviving characters continue to have a strong connection with the other three characters through memories. Kip and Hana continue to heal by sharing the memories and trauma of the war.

Works Cited

- Clark, Robert. "Knotting Desire in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 37.2 (2002): 59-71. Print.
- Longley, Kateryna. "Places of Refuge: Postcolonial Spaces." *SPAN* 44 (1997): 8-21. Print.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. New York: Garland, 1999. Print.
- Wachtel, Eleanor. "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje." *Essays on Canadian Writing* Toronto (1994). 250-8. Print.
- Waites, Elizabeth A. *Trauma and Survival: Post-Traumatic and Dissociative Disorders in Women*. New York: Norton, 1993. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. "The World and the Home." *Third World and Post-Colonial Issues*. 31/32. (1992): 141-53. *JSTOR*. Web. 23 March 2007. <<http://library.uncwil.edu/>>
- Kyser, Kristina. "Seeing Everything in a Different Light: Vision and Revelation in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 70.4. (2001): n.pag. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 23 March 2007. <<http://library.uncwil.edu/>>.