Towards a Decolonized Self: An Analysis of the Character of Kip in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*

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**Abstract**

Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, has usually been read as a novel which deals with the formation and negation of national identity in terms of ‘markers’ – particularly that of the human body; and this reading has traditionally centered round the character of Almasy, the supposedly English patient in the novel. Given the view that negotiating identity within colonial space has been one of the major concerns with postcolonial discourse in terms of the dynamics between the so-termed ‘outsider’ and the ‘insider’; it also attempts at analyzing an accepted/adopted identity and arriving at a reversal of the same through a process of self-scrutiny in the light of some new fact. The proposed paper attempts to study the character of Kirpal Singh, also known as Kip, the Indian sapper in Ondaatje’s novel, who, although having adopted an almost English identity later realizes the futility of it and draws the conclusion that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized will always be based on terms of power and exploitation. Through the character of Kip and his experiences in foreign lands, the paper attempts at focusing on how individuals and nations tend to establish hierarchical relationships. It has also been an attempt to show how all the major characters in this novel, who are as if thrown by fate to meet in a foreign land in the backdrop of war, undergo a critical assessment of their national identities through an act of negation.

**Keywords:** The English Patient, Michael Ondaatje, national identity, postcolonialism, World War II.

**Introduction**

One of the prime objectives of imperialism and colonialism, along with the motive of enhancing the economic position of the metropole, has been the colonizing of the native/subject self either though acculturation or, in the failure of it, through repression. This act widened the scope of colonial activities beyond economics and commerce and included other spheres such as culture and social practices which, at times, resulted in a conflict within the subject self and at other times, within the same society. Consequently, it turns out that one of the major thrusts of postcolonial writings has been towards the decolonizing of the colonized self from the imposed and/or adopted values which aimed at a conversion of the original subject self. It is, however, a matter of discussion whether it is really possible to completely shake off the cocoon of adopted values. Still, it remains without doubt that the decolonization project, even if we were to use the term after the manner of the Kenyan author and critic Ngugi wa Thiong’o, constitutes an undeniable aspect of postcolonial writings [1]. The present paper attempts at an analysis of the character of Kirpal Singh alias Kip in Michael Ondaatje’s Booker Prize winning novel for 1992, *The English Patient*, to focus on how Kip’s character presents a gradual move from an acceptance of colonial identity based on adoption and acculturation to a rejection of it, there by representing a movement towards decolonization and at the same time becoming a symbolic movement towards an understanding of the colonial project. During the process of analysis, the paper also focuses on certain symbols and instances which come to symbolize ‘Indianness’ from the English, and hence the European, point of view.

Sri Lankan author, Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, has been praised variously. Toni Morrison terms this novel as “profound, beautiful and heart-quickenning”, while Russell Banks hails it as “one of those rare novels with so much poetry and lucidity that you will find your-self reading it a second and third time, savouring its beauty and intelligence for weeks”. *The English Patient* deals with the predicament of four characters that, as if ordained by fate, come across one another in an old and abandoned Italian villa called San Girolamo in the backdrop of the Second World War. These characters belong to different nations and under normal circumstances they would have maintained a distance which is supposed to naturally divide them on terms of their national allegiances; but given the backdrop of the War is on (and nearing its end), and the devilishness of which continue to threaten people both in the small Italian town and the wider world abroad, the Villa provides them a space in which the differences based on their national identity are dissolved to a great extent and the bonds which hold them together are forged chiefly on humanitarian values and feelings. The villa of San Girolamo, thus, becomes a space in which the bindings of national identity are lost. In fact, one of the most common approaches towards the novel has been to interpret it as a text which deals with the dissolution and negation of national identity. This concept is very significant since the time in human history which the novel deals with is rife with struggles among nation-states to capture and manipulate power across the globe.

The four persons in the villa are Hana, a Canadian and nurse by profession, an English patient who is burnt beyond recognition, who later turns out to be the Hunga-
rian spy Laszlo de Almasy, David Caravaggio, an Italian-Canadian in the British Intelligence Services, and Kirpal Singh or Kip, an Indian sapper in the British army fighting for the Allies. Thus, the four major characters in the novel are away from their homelands and their experiences are related to their search for an identity – but an identity which defies the narrow confines of nation state politics. This tryst with identity becomes for them a search for the ‘true’ self outside the confines of territorial boundary, which is, under the politics of nationhood and colonialism, not easy to attain. The inclusion of Kirpal Singh is important from the fact that his participation in the campaign is an indication of how the metropole was employing its colonial subjects in the War. This paper primarily aims at an analysis of the role and experiences of Kirpal Singh, also called Kip by his colleagues, in understanding how the idea of belonging to a nation can undergo changes in the face of newer experiences. The focus will be more on Kip since he is the only colonial subject among the four major characters in the novel; and given the historical period in which the novel is set, it is important in understanding the ‘Indian’ response to a War which was later to change the very definition of war and holocaust. At the same time, the paper will also aim at examining how this novel subverts the concept of national identity, in which the human body and other things associated to it become important indicators of national boundary.

The war-torn nature of the Tuscan villa in which Hana stayed with her patient has been described in the following manner:

It is still terrible out there. Dead cattle. Horses shot dead, half eaten. People hanging upside down from bridges. The last vices of war. Completely unsafe. The sappers haven’t gone in there yet to clear it. The Germans retreated burying and installing mines as they went. A terrible place for a hospital. The smell of the dead is the worst. We need a good snowfall to clean up this country. We need ravens [2].

The description of this otherwise artistically designed villa is in direct contrast to the vision of those who had constructed it with each room painted in a different season [3]. It tells us the readers of two things. First, that in the context of war, this beautiful villa had turned into a treacherous and dangerous zone where death awaited with many unpleasant and sudden surprises in the form of booby-traps and wired mines; second, this is the passage in which the word ‘sapper’ occurs for the first time in the novel, referring to a group of specially trained soldiers and engineers expert in the defusing of unexploded bombs – a dangerous profession in which many of the sappers lost their limbs and lives since the technology of explosives kept on changing with the advancement of war. The dreadful ingenuity with which bombs were wired has been described by the author with reference to Kip when he describes how this young sapper thought of bombs:

Bombs were attached to taps, to the spines of books, they were drilled into fruit trees so an apple falling onto a lower branch would detonate the tree, just as a hand gripping that branch would. He was unable to look at a room or field without seeing the possibilities of weapons there [4].

Kip is introduced into the novel much later when he, along with one of his sapper friends, is drawn towards the villa by the music of a piano. But it should be pointed out here that he is not drawn by the sweetness of the music played by Hana rather it was the potential threat of a bomb being wired to the keys of the piano that had forced him to approach the villa and seek the pianoplayer out of concern for the safety of the latter. It is interesting to note how Kip’s turban becomes the symbolic badge of his identity as a Sikh, and also as an Indian:

A lightning flash across the valley, the storm had been coming all night, and she saw one of the men was a Sikh. Now she paused and smiled, somewhat amazed, relieved anyway, the cyclorama of light behind them so brief that it was just a quick glimpse of his turban and the bright wet guns [5].

Like Kip’s turban, his kada (bracelet) too later becomes a symbolic object of his nationality.

In order to appreciate the role of Kip in a better way, it is necessary to begin with his youth and his home in the Punjab. He had been conscripted into the army in place of his elder brother who, being the nationalist type, had refused to serve the British in a war which was not of Indians, yet Kip always thought very highly of his brother:

‘But to me my brother was always the hero in the family. I was in the slipstream of his status as firebrand. I witnessed his exhaustion that came after each protest, his body gearing up to respond to this insult or that law. He broke the tradition of our family and refused, in spite of being the oldest brother, to join the army. He refused to agree to any situation where the English had power. So they dragged him into their hails, in the Lahore Central Prison. Later the Jatnagar jail. Lying back on his cot at night, his arm raised within plaster, broken by his friends to protect him, to stop him trying to escape. In jail he became serene and devious [6].

So, the dissident in Kip’s family had been his eldest brother who was against any sort of activity which might
go in favour of the British. His brother presents to the readers another side of Indian view regarding the war shared by many Indians who were opposed to India’s involvement in it. But Kip’s experiences on arrival in England show a complexity in response to the question of race and colonialism.

In England, he becomes a member of Lord Suffolk’s team of chosen sappers, and is awed by the magnanimity which the Englishman shows towards him. It is perhaps only with Lord Suffolk that he is at ease and does not feel the barrier of race and colour standing between them so much as he had felt it with others. Lord Suffolk’s love towards him makes Kip like the Officer very much and when the latter dies in a tricky bomb explosion, he loses all meaning in life and war and tries to drown himself in action in Italy. At this juncture, it is important to mention that the character of Lord Suffolk in this novel draws directly from the life of Lord Suffolk, who had been an officer and a leader of the sappers in the war; and whose death had also occurred in the same way as that of Lord Suffolk in the novel. Kip’s attachment towards Lord Suffolk in the novel has been described thus:

Kirpal Singh had been befriended, and he would never forget it. So far, half of his time during the war had taken place in the slipstream of this lord who had never stepped out of England and planned never to step out of Countisbury once the war ended. 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. So that when he read the notice asking for volunteers with an experimental bomb squad, even though he heard other sappers speak of Lord Suffolk as a madman, he had already decided that in a war you have to take control, and there was a greater chance of choice and life alongside a personality or an individual [7].

Kip’s assessment of the English is based on his understanding of the fact that as a colonial subject, he would always be ‘gazed’ upon differently. The way in which he describes his experience in the interview hall tells very clearly of this perception:

He looked back at the others, peered around the room and caught the gaze of the middle-aged secretary. She watched him sternly. An Indian boy. He smiled and walked towards the bookshelves. Again he touched nothing. At one point he put his nose close to a volume called Raymond, or Life and Death by Sir Oliver Hodge. He found another similar title. Pierre, or the Ambiguities. He turned and caught the woman’s eyes on him again. He felt as guilty as if he had put the book in his pocket. She had probably never seen a turban before. The Eng-

lish! They expect you to fight for them but won’t talk to you. Singh. And the ambiguities (Italics mine) [8].

While there is every possibility that Kirpal Singh might have fallen a victim to the pre-conceived notion that to every Englishman an Indian is an inferior object, there is no denying the fact that to a great extent his thought represent the predicament of India as a nation that was expected to fight for them without expecting anything in return – a fact which had been a problem with many nationalists. In this connection it would also not be out of place to point out that this was a common feeling shared by many colonies who had been made unwilling participants in a war which was not their own. African writing, for example, is replete with examples which support this view. Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Weep Not, Child (1964) and Buchi Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood (1979) can be cited as instances in this regard.

One important aspect in the portrayal of Kirpal Singh becomes the continued references to his habits and practices which are perceived by the other characters as being ‘Indian’ and hence for them, foreign. The recurrent references to such practices may be taken as representing being an Indian in contrast to what may be termed as being a European. It is also indicative of the fact that in spite of having been attracted towards English culture, Kip had not completely foregone his Indian roots which survived in him in the form of habits. For instance, Kip has the habit of washing his hands before and after taking food and also eats with his right hand and not with fork and knife, which becomes an essential symbol of his Indianness, and which is taken by Hana and Caravaggio as quite a foreign practice. It is equally interesting to note the tone of subdued humour which Caravaggio employs in relation to the sapper’s eating habits:

At lunch there is Caravaggio’s avuncular glance at the objects on the blue handkerchief. There is probably some rare animal, Caravaggio thinks, who eats the same foods that this young soldier eats with his right hand and not with fork and knife, which becomes an essential symbol of his Indianness, and which is taken by Hana and Caravaggio as quite a foreign practice. It is equally interesting to note the tone of subdued humour which Caravaggio employs in relation to the sapper’s eating habits:

He pours tooth powder onto the brush and begins a ten-minute session of lackadaisical brushing as he wanders around looking down into the valley still buried in the mist, his mind curious rather than awe-struck at the vista he happens now to be living above. The brushing of teeth, since he was a child, has always been for him an outdoor activity [10].
The inclusion of the last phrase “has always been for him an outdoor activity” brings to the fore that in most Indian cultures, the brushing of teeth and washing of face in the morning is usually done outside the home. Therefore, it may be held here that the habit has become a part of Kip and habitually he enters into this ‘ritual’ without himself being aware of it as a marker of national (and social) identity.

Even in his profession as a Sapper, he can feel the racial boundary which divided him from the other European sappers. The fact that Kip walked the fine line between life and death every time he engaged himself into defusing a bomb, and saving a good number of European lives in the process, does not succeed in wiping out the racial differences which existed between the sapper from the colony and other European sappers engaged in the same activity. The following passage describes this predicament of Kip in a befitting manner:

Wise white fatherly men shook hands, were acknowledged, and limped away, having been coaxed out of solitude for this special occasion. But he was a professional. And he remained the foreigner, the Sikh. His only human and personal contact was this enemy who had made the bomb and departed brushing his tracks with a branch behind him [11].

There seems to be something in-born in the nature of Kip which makes him suitable for the job of a sapper which the author terms as ‘the rogue gaze’:

He was by nature conservative but able also to imagine the worst devices, the capacity for accident in a room – a plum on a table, a child approaching and eating the pit of poison, a man walking into a dark room and before joining his wife in bed brushing loose a paraffin lamp from its bracket. Any room was full of such choreography. The rogue gaze could see the buried line under the surface, how a knot might weave when out of sight. He turned away from mystery books with irritation, able to pinpoint villains with too much ease [12].

It is quite clear that Kip’s experiences as a Sapper tells us enough of the alienation which he had felt as the lone Sikh in this profession, yet he had also found some amount of recognition from Lord Suffolk and his assistant. It was the memory of the trust that Lord Suffolk had placed on him which had led him through the cracking conditions of his profession. Yet, it was all to change very soon. The dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki altered his belief in the rationality of the West. This act of massacre was a betrayal of the human feelings that he had placed on those he was fighting for. There is a complete reversal in his perceptions and he begins to see things in a new light. The European colonial agenda becomes clear to him and he reacts violently. His anger and disagreement is directed towards the English patient who, for him, symbolizes the hypocrisy and betrayal imperialism stood for. He also decides to cut off all ties with Hana, whom he loved. The dropping of the bombs on Japan symbolize for Kip the crux of Europe’s outlook towards Asia:

He feels all the winds of the world have been sucked into Asia. He steps away from the many small bombs of his career towards a bomb the size, it seems, of a city, so vast it lets the living witness the death of the population around them [13].

He is suddenly aware once again of the fact that he is an outsider in this War which he had mistakenly taken to be his:

…he had brought out the photograph of his family and gazed at it. His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here [14].

The reference to his name has not been done for nothing by the author. It is a realization of Kip that he does not belong to Europe and also that he has been unwittingly made a part of this great politics of power among nations aiming to control the larger portion of the world’s resources. The jolt is sudden and strong, and he decides that he will not have anything to do with this War any more. This is evident in his packing the tools of his trade:

He has not eaten food or drunk water, is unable to swallow anything. Before the light failed he stripped the tent of all military objects, all bomb disposal equipment, stripped all insignia off his uniform. Before lying down he undid the turban and combed his hair out and then he tied it up into a topknot and lay back, saw the light on the skin of the tent slowly disperse, his eyes holding onto the last blue of light, hearing the drop of wind into wind-lessness and then hearing the swerve of the hawks as their wings thudded. And all the delicate noises of the air [15].

As Kip enters the room where the English patient is kept (with the intention of killing him), he questions the validity of the logic which may have worked behind the bombing of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, at the same time venting, out his unbelief and anger at the burnt man:

You stood for precise behavior. I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I’d be banished. If I tied the wrong kind of knot in a tie I was out. Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had the histories and printing presses? [16]
Here, Kip is directly questioning the achievements on which the western civilization has prided itself as superior. He also questions the role of religion in maintaining colonial power in the following words:

You and then the Americans converted us. With your missionary rules. And Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be pukkah. You had wars like cricket. How did you fool us into this? Here...listen to what you people have done [17].

He further adds the futility of serving a system which would finally fool and betray them:

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. But we, oh, we were easily impressed – by speeches and medals and your ceremonies. What have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For this to happen? [18]

When Caravaggio and Hana try to dissuade him from killing Almasy because he isn’t an Englishman, Kip gives them a reply which generalizes the common attitude of the European nations towards the non-white races:

American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman. You had Kind Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English [19].

Thus, for the Indian sapper the English stand as the symbol of colonialism, imperialism and racism. Finally, frustrated and tired, Kirpal Singh decides to leave all contact with his present world; he bids goodbye to Caravaggio and to Hana, whom he loved. The novel ends with the author imagining Kip and Hana three years after their separation, living in their separate worlds – Kip in his home in India and Hana engaged in her mission of serving the wounded and the sick in some unspecified location in Europe.

At the end, it can be said that Kip, through his role as a sapper in the British army, huddled into war far away from home, represents to us a consciousness which serves as a critique of colonial logic entwined with the issue of identity in an environment which refuses to see him as another human being because he is a Sikh. Yet, his coming to terms with the fact that as an Indian he will always be treated differently from his European, particularly English, counterparts goes on to prove his realization of being the ‘Other’ – a marginalized subject in a colonial set up. His reactions on hearing the news of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and his subsequent return home, however small and insignificant they may seem in the backdrop of the greater war, are in no measure insignificant as attempts at shaking off the shackles of a colonial mind set and decolonizing the self. In his words and deeds, Kip becomes the author’s mouthpiece for critiquing the colonial and imperial project and exposing the falsity and hollowness of the agenda and achievements upon which the European nations have prided them as superior.

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References:


