

Hybridity and the Reconstruction of Identity in Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient

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Abstract

With the advent of post-colonial discourse, hybridity becomes a pivotal concern. A cluster of Post-colonial theorists, like Homi Bhabha, downplay oppositionality and call for an increasing intercultural dialogue and mutuality. They stress the interdependence of the colonizer and the colonized, preferring hybridity to a monolithic, exclusive culture. Indeed, the binary opposition Self/Other seems to collapse in the post-colonial context with the existence of a hybrid culture or a Liminal Space, which is likely to reduce cultural and racial sensitivity. This modest paper examines Michael Ondaatje's novel, The English Patient, which raises fundamental issues of wars, nations and boundaries. It envisages a world, in which different cultures become intermingled, interdependent and hybrid. The novel suggests the possibility of a Liminal World, which crosses borders, a Third space that might fuse people of different races and nationalities, a world in which people forget their narcissistic origin. Resisting the Eurocentric vision of the world, the novel attempts to transcend and tergiversate the traditional manichean thinking, which often leads to wars, oppression and cultural conflicts. It calls for a reassessment of the traditional relationship between the Self and the Other.

Key words: border crossing, hybridity, Liminal Space, Third Space, post-colonialism.

Blurring of boundaries, in the novel, is crystal clear from the characters' relationship with each other. They are all victims of a ravaging war pursued for nationalistic ends, a war which had a great influence on their psychological make-up. This is the reason why these characters attempt to forget/flee from their original identities and start to reconstruct their new ones. In his discussion of the concept of nation and its monolithic and exclusive nature, the critic John McLeod writes: "Nations invent divisive borders, coercive regulations, notions of authenticity and illegitimacy which impact upon the matters of belonging and group membership. The nation is imagined as a finite space, occupying a certain terrain, inclusive of a particular people, 'us' rather than 'them' " (101).

Because their suffering tangled with problems of nations, characters wanted to escape from the seamy side of existence, which is defined and marked by maps and borders. Thus, to step beyond the existing borders of nations becomes a pressing quest for all the characters. The critic Marilyn Adler Papayanisin writes: "*The English patient* revisits the problem of the Western subject's desire for liberation from the demands of social form, national identity, and instrumental reason" (222). The major characters, the English patient, Hana, Caravaggio and Kip are representative of a liminal space or a hybrid space, which aspires to remove or destroy the traditional Manichean myth.

In their definition of the term hybridity, the critics Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin state that

One of the most employed and most disputed terms in post-colonial theory, hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. As used in horticulture, the term refers to the cross-breeding of two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a third, 'hybrid' species. Hybridization takes many forms: linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc"(108).

In this sense, hybridity is used in post-colonial theory to refer to intercultural space, space of in-betweenness. It implies a direct contact between Self and Other or their fusion in a single, mixed and impure culture. This view collides head on with that of Edward Said, one of the early theorists of cultural hybridity, who asserts that "Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more 'foreign' elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude" (15). Hence, hybridity is likely to reduce the sharp dualistic or Manichean thinking and break the rigidly established barriers between the colonizer and the colonized. It is a daring attempt to find a common space where cultures meet. The critic Peter Brooker develops further this idea and points out that the meanings of the term hybridity refer "the mixed or hyphenated identities of persons or ethnic communities, or of texts which express and explore this conditions" (5).

The identity of the English patient is a glaring example of hybridity in the novel. After a plane crash, the English patient's skin, which evinces his race and clarifies his identity, is burnt; "A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identifications are consumed in a fire [...] There was nothing to recognize in him" (*The English Patient* 29). Indeed, the English patient loses both the external and the internal indicators of his identity. In addition to his skin, which is burnt, the English patient loses or pretends to lose his memory. His burnt skin symbolizes the effacement of his identity because the colour of his complexion is likely to evince his race. According to the critic Dimple Godiwala,

The color of skin is perhaps the most arbitrary of signifiers that attaches itself to the racial other. Blackness was a signifier which was formulated in opposition to a non-homogeneous 'white' space. The signified was a racial other, quite specifically the colonized and often, enslaved Other. 'White' then was really a non-blackness, a state of being non-colonized: a space which represented the colonizer himself (74).

In his commentary on the English patient's burnt skin, the critic John Boland, in turn, states: "His physical appearance images the erasure of national identity. His collaboration in the Western project to delineate, name and so possess the unmapped desert has resulted in the obliteration of his own feature, the map of his identity" (32).

Due to his unknown and anonymous identity, the English patient finds it possible to transgress frontiers, to transcend and cross borders. If his nationality was known, he would have remained imprisoned within borders he cannot cross, or he would have been killed. The English patient expresses his vitriolic and abhorrent vision of nationhood and borders as follows: "I came to hate nations [...] We are deformed by nation-states. Maddox died because of nations [...] All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries" (94).

The burnt body of the English patient becomes a liminal space. He is thought to be English (white) while his skin, which is burnt, becomes black. Thus, he hovers between two identities; "He was interrogated again. Everything about him was very English except for the fact that his skin was turned black [...] He rambled down on, driving them mad, traitor or ally, leaving them never quite sure who he was" (*The English Patient* 59).

The burnt skin is symbolic in many ways. The renewal of the English patient's burnt skin is symbolic of the renewal of his identity. His incapacity or pretention not to remember his past indicates his unwillingness to stick to the traditional limitations of nations. Instead, he tried to shake free from the borders of his nation and to reconstruct a new national identity, a less rigid, more tolerant and more flexible one. According to the critic Stephanie M. Hilger, "The 'English' patient hovers on the dividing line between the civilized and the barbarian. His presence undermines any rigidly established barrier between these two terms. In creating the character of the 'English' patient, Ondaatje continues Michel de Montaigne's sixteenth century questioning of this barrier" (41). The burned skin of the English patient is symbolic of the breakdown of the boundaries between the Self and the Other, because the colour of the skin is a distinctive and idiosyncratic feature. Hence, he becomes anonymous, universal and spaceless.

Seemingly, the English patient is a ramshackle encyclopedia, who knows about many cultures, nations and histories, and this makes him more hybrid and universal. This fact is highlighted by his remark about the armies at war as "[t]he Barbarians versus the Barbarians. Both armies would come through the desert with no sense of what it was"(161). So, for him, both sides are wrong in the war. Indeed, the polarities centre/margin, civilized/barbarian, seem to collapse into each other. Because he knows many languages, the English patient becomes a polyglot, a fact which further vindicates the erroneous idea of a monolithic identity.

The English patient's and Katherine's torrid love affair, which is intermingled with the events of the story, is the best metaphor for international relations and alliances. Katherine is British, whereas the English patient, who is thought to be the German spy Almsay by Caravaggio, is Hungarian. This love story, which doomed to end tragically due to the impeding national barriers, makes Almsay a staunch opponent of borders and boundaries. After leaving his beloved Katherine, who is deeply injured, in the Cave of Swimmers, Almsay treks in the desert to seek medical help. In his way, he faces two junior British officers, who refuse to give him a truck to save the life of the woman he loves. Because he does not have identification papers to prove his identity and his name does not sound English, he is incarcerated. Added to this, he fails to call Katherine by her married name. To return to the cave, later, Almsay is proffered help by a German

spy, to whom he gives maps, which help the Germans invade Tobruk. Arriving at the cave, he finds Katherine a decomposing corpse.

Katherine's death makes Almsay sickened of borders, more burdened and encumbered with the burden of nations. In a poignant plea, he repudiates national boundaries as follows: "We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps" (The English Patient 164).

Very much like the English patient, nations become a nightmare from which Kip is trying to awaken. Kip's dream and aspiration is to be totally submerged in the English culture. He goes to Europe and joins the English Army. He tries to belong and to adopt. His attempts to integrate into the British culture is evinced in his attempt to follow the Western traditions slavishly; "he is a man from Asia who has in these last years of war assumed English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son" (135). Even his Indian name Kirpal Singh is changed into a nickname, Kip, which is given to him by British soldiers.

Despite his skills, which he exerts in defusing bombs, Kip fails to attain a decent place among the British. Because of his brown skin, his hopes crumble to dust. But he was once befriended by his mentor Lord Suffolk and his assistants, Miss Morden and Mr. Harts. Their death, during a bomb explosion, left him alienated and psychically wretched.

Through the character Kip, who is Indian, the demarcations of geography, race and nation are once more broken. His arduous job of dismantling bombs is symbolic of the destruction/deconstruction of the binary opposition Self/Other. This act also attests his intelligence, a quality which is always associated with the white race.

Kip's crossing of borders is also highlighted by his relationship with the English patient and a Canadian nurse called Hana. Before joining the characters in an Italian villa, Kip was buffeted by the extreme pangs of loneliness and solitude. This solitariness, loss and separation, which dominated his life, are on account of his race, which is deemed inferior and marginal. Hana, Kip and the English patient develop a relationship where the gulf of nations vanishes. Boland comments: "They are linked by a shared experience of grieving for lost fathers. At first self-sufficient and introverted, Kip begins to re-establish bonds of relationship again through affection for the patient and his love for Hana. He feels integrated in a community once more and celebrated this by organizing a birthday dinner for Hana" (27). In addition to his romantic relationship with Hana, Kip loves the English patient and believes in his Englishness. He even views him as a dead father. Knowing multifarious cultures and ethnic nations, he and the English patient become alike; they are both 'international bastards' (111). That is to say, their identities are not unified or homogeneous.

Similar to the English patient and Kip, Hana's ordeal seems to stem from the problem of national borders. As a nurse, she is a selfless and passionate woman, who wants to save the severely injured English patient. She is a comprehensible compendium, who "doesn't matter what side he was on" (103). The fact that he is deeply wounded because of wars makes him a 'despairing

saint' (28) for her. Her saving of his life despite ignoring his real identity evinces her desire to obliterate the barriers of gender and nations and to accept the Other. Her letter to her stepmother, Clara, shows that nationhood is a pressing concern. She asks: "Do you understand the sadness of geography?" (*The English Patient* 185). Her refusal to look in the mirror during the war is symbolic of her rejection of racial narcissism; "She has removed all mirrors and stacked them away in an empty room" (15).

Indeed, the English patient seems to fill in what is missing in Hana's life. She considers him as her step-father Patrick Lewis, who is murdered in the war. She, at times, views him as a lover, a substitute for her beloved, a soldier who is killed in the war. He also fills the emotional vacuum left after aborting her child.

Hana's love for Kip betrays the distance between Self and Other, because Kip is an Indian non-white man, while Hana is a white Canadian woman. Because national borders are responsible for her deplorable state, Hana ignores the constrictions of nationhood and race, and she developed an intimate relationship with him. She even adores and admires the brownness of his skin and his dark hair, which she views as colours in the spectrum of the complete human race. Their romantic relationship is symbolic of cross-cultural contact and interaction. It vindicates the possibility of a Third Space despite cultural differences and divergences. It shows the fusion and diffusion of Self and Other.

Like the other characters, Caravaggio's heart is so burdened with the preoccupations of national boundaries. The latter lead to his physical maiming and left him psychologically tortured. Caravaggio is a Canadian, who was a thief, and later, he turned to be a spy in the war. But what he steals is not properties but rather identities. He was very skilful in creating and constructing identities; "he had been trained to invent double agents or phantoms who would take on flesh. He had been in charge of a mythical agent named 'cheese', and he spent weeks clothing him with facts, giving him qualities of character" (73).

Caravaggio vehemently hates the English patient and detests Hana's relationship with him, because he suspects him of being the spy whose treachery is behind his permanent disfiguration by the Nazis, who cut off his thumbs. In derogatory terms, he describes the English patient as a corpse or as a "pure carbon"(68). In a daring attempt to compel him to tell his story, and to reveal his identity, which is buried under skin, Caravaggio drugs the English patient, who confesses that he is Count Almásy. Listening to the English patient's story, which is very tragic and pessimistic, Caravaggio's antagonism turns to pity, sympathy, tolerance and even love. It makes him forget his anger and his proclivity to take revenge. Boland notes that "questions of national betrayal come to seem irrelevant in comparison with the personal bonds Caravaggio has established with the patient" (29). Community of Caravaggio and the English patient is a result of their mutual and reciprocal understanding. Through their relation, Caravaggio's relation with the external world is modified.

Like Hana, Caravaggio's interpretation of the English patient's identity is personal and self-reflective. His version of the English patient's identity befits one of his spy dramas. Giving him the identity of Almsay enables him to release his pent up emotions and to heal his psychic wounds. His

crossing of boundaries is further highlighted by his fatherly relationship with Hana whose father dies in the war.

In addition to the aforementioned major characters, Katherine's adulterous relationship with Almsay is a metaphor for transgressing national borders. This relationship, which ends with her husband's, Clifton, attempt of a crash plane, evinces how nations betray each other for the sake of possession and ownership. The imminent death of Clifton, after the accident, and the grave injuries of his wife, Katherine, point to the destructive effects of nations' greed of ownership and possession. In a conversation with Katherine, Almsay asks: "What do you hate most?" She answers: "A lie. And you?" "Ownership" he says. "When you leave me, forget me" (The English patient 94). The death of Clifton, after the plane crash, is symbolic of homicidal megalomania. The latter refers to the delusion of grandeur and narcissism characterizing the whole Western civilization. His death is also symbolic of the destructive effects of the narcissistic love of nations. This narcissistic love is reinforced by referring to the story of Candaules and his queen from Herodotus' book The Histories.

The death of Katherine is also symbolic. Her demise marks and reinforces the English patient's abandoning of the idea of ownership/belonging. It also signifies the disastrous effects of the betrayal and invidious jealousy of nations, which is symbolized by Clifton's envenomed jealousy.

Though Katherine would have hated to die nameless in a borderless land, she died in the Cave of Swimmers, in a no-man's land and anonymously; "Her passion for the desert was temporary [...] She would have hated to die without a name. For her, there was a line back to her ancestors that was tactile" (The English Patient 106). If her death in the desert would have been a curse for her, it was holy for Almsay, because the two lovers could unite only in the desert, in the 'earth without maps'. Her anonymous death is confluent with Almsay's hatred of naming, because the latter fixes things within a certain ideology or system. It is a boundary because it suggests and indicates one's nation.

Katherine's burial in the desert, which is not her homeland, signals her symbolic entrance to another culture. She becomes a member and an inhabitant of the land where she is buried. In his description of the momentous moment of her burial, Almsay says:

Such glory of this country she enters now and becomes part of it. We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we 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. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography-to be marked by Nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings (The English patient 164).

Almsay's love affair with Katherine is symbolic not only of the blurring of national borders but also of social boundaries. Almsay has "hunger wishes to burn down all social rules, all courtesy

[...] she is within the wall of her class [...] But now he cannot bear this wall in her. You built your walls too, she tells him, so I have my wall” (96-97). Hence, Almasy dislikes the walls and barriers of social classes; he aspires to transcend all kinds of boundaries and borders. In his comment on Katherine and Almasy’s relationship, Boland suggests the following interpretation: “The violence of Almasy’s passion for Katherine is partly attributed to his need to wrest her from social controls and reach a self that is outside the stereotypes of class and gender, outside the social conditioning of the past” (42). So, love engulfs individuals and brings them together. This fusion of Self and Other cannot be pulled apart by boundaries and borders.

After returning to the Cave of Swimmers, where he left his beloved Katherine gravely injured, Almasy had a sexual intercourse with her dead body, an act which is highly evocative:

I approached her naked as I would have done in our South Cairo room, wanting to undress her, still wanting to love her. What is terrible in what I did? Don’t we forgive everything of a lover? We forgive selfishness, desire, guile. As long as we are the motive for it. You can make love to a woman with a broken arm, or a woman with fever [...] There are some European words you can never translate properly into another language. *Felhomaly*. The dusk of graves. With the connotation of intimacy between the dead and the living” (106-107).

Indeed, Almasy’s necrophilia is, perhaps, the novel’s extreme blurring/crossing of boundaries even between the living and the dead. It evinces the Self’s inevitable attachment and its hunger for contact to the Other. When she was alive, there were boundaries that hampered and hindered their mutuality. But being a corpse, Katherine cannot reject Almasy’s proximity.

The quest of all the major characters, who belong to different national identities, is to reconstruct their identities. In pursuit of this aim, they rely on and interact with each other. This implies that the Self is defined and constructed in relation to an Other. Borders are fluid and cultures are not autonomous and self-sufficient. As the critic Milica Zivkovic points out, “[t]here can be no fixed or true identity, no origin or original [...] There is no ultimate knowledge, representation is no longer a matter of veracity or accuracy but merely of competing”(99). In this view, national identities are inclusive rather than exclusive. Borders, which are thought to be divisive, might be uniting. This view goes along the line of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s discussion of borders. In “Borders and Bridges, he writes:

[I]f a border marks the outer edge of one region, it also marks the beginning of the next region. As the marker of an end, it also functions as the marker of a beginning. Without the end of one region, there can be no beginning of another. Depending on our starting point, the border is both the beginning and the outer edge. Each space is beyond the boundary of the other. It is thus at once a boundary and a shared space” (120).

The act of reading, in the novel, is symbolic of the desire to connect to the other nations. Katherine reads to get knowledge about Cairo and the desert. Likewise, Almásy reads Herodotus' The Histories in order to know about the other cultures and places. Through reading, a habit that she starts only in the Italian villa, Hana travels to other nations and learn about many cultures; "She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others" (8). The act of reading also becomes a binder that connects characters together. As the English patient informs Caravaggio, "The only way I could get [Hana] to communicate was to ask her to read to me"(158).

In the novel, there are many allusions to different literary texts like Rudyard Kipling's Kim, James Fenimore Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans, Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. Interestingly, all these texts, which are referred to, deal with the encounter between the European and the Other. Thus, they reinforce the theme of border crossing. The critic Abdul. R. Jan Mohamed states that colonialist texts like E.M. Forster's A Passage to India and Rudyard Kipling's Kim attempt "to find syncretic solutions to the Manichean opposition of the colonizer and the colonized" (19).

Reading also implies reinterpreting or reconstructing identity/history. The English patient's addition of his notes and observations, in his copy of Herodotus' The Histories, is symbolic of his rewriting of his history and the reconstruction of his personal identity. After the plane crash, the English patient was found with a "copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations-so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus" (10). This reconstruction of identity and rewriting of history imply a reversal and displacement of hierarchical binary oppositions and a redefinition of otherness. The English patient makes of his copy of The Histories a hotch-potch of many writings; "And in his common place book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus' *Histories*, are other fragments-maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books. All that is missing is his own name" (59). This quote points to intertextuality, which is symbolic of the interaction between different individuals and cultures. This interconnectedness results in an identity characterized by difference and multiplicity.

Like the English patient, Hana writes her own observations in the library books like The Last of the Mohicans; "She opens The Last of the Mohicans to the blank page at the back and begins to write in it"(30). The critic D. Emily Hicks states: "If writing is always a rereading, is not reading always a rewriting? Such a question points up the context in which border writing must be approached as a process of negotiation"(11). Reading or interpreting the Other is very personal, and it is not based on plausible or cogent arguments. Hence, history is 'his' story.

The English patient himself becomes a book, which is open to many interpretations. In a conversation with Caravaggio, he says: "Or am I just a book? Something to be read, some creature to be tempted out of a loch and shot full of morphine, full of corridors, lies, loose vegetation, pockets of stones" (The English patient 158).The identity of the English patient remains an enigma for all the characters of the novel. This identity, which is hidden under his burnt skin, should be excavated. The search for his real identity is like reading or decoding a literary text, and the act of reading, of course, is very personal. Readers have multifarious interpretations of the same literary

text. This implies, in turn, that the way of looking at the 'Other' is biased and prejudiced. Characters' reading of the English patient's identity, for example, befits their psychological needs.

The theme of crossing borders is also conveyed through images and symbols. The desert and the villa, San Girolamo, are richly symbolic and metaphorical. The desert, which is the most predominating image, represents a liminal space for the English patient, who dreams of no limitations and no national constraints; "Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert [...] By the time war arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation" (*The English Patient* 85-86). This is a direct call for a collective identity, which is not tied to a single family name or to any culture. This fervid desire for hybridity is fulfilled in the desert.

In the desert, Almsay steps beyond the entanglement of borders, which exert a tremendous pressure on his life. In this space, dichotomies are precluded; boundaries are dissolved and eroded. Almsay admired the nomads he found there because the concept of nations, for them, is meaningless; "There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I've met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, Africa-all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless" (*The English Patient* 85). Being far from the arenas of cultural and political struggle, the desert becomes borderless like a river; the concept of nation loses its significance and the explorers, who were from different cultures, could unite and blend. Almsay likes the desert because names and nationalities are eluded there. After his plane crash in the desert, and after being saved by a tribe, Almsay felt that he "was among water people" (12). Water, here, conjures impressions of borderlessness because with its lack or loss of physical boundaries, the desert becomes like a river.

The desert proffers the English patient freedom from the ties of borders and belonging because "[t]he desert could not be claimed or owned" (*The English Patient* 85). So, ownership, possession and nation lose their sinew in the desert. The critic Marilyn Adler Papayanisin notifies that "Where names and naming are associated with domination, ownership, ancestral ties, and stable geographies, Almsay embraces an ethics of anonymity and chooses the desert, a site of radical liberation, as 'the one true place'" (224). The desert prompts Almsay to imagine a world without divisions and alignments. It is a borderless place where people of different racial, ethnic and national origins meet, unite and befriend each other.

His description of the deserts of Libya carries sexual connotations. He says: "Remove politics, and it is the loveliest place I know. *Libya*. A sexual, drawn-out word, a coaxed well. The *b* and the *y*. Madox said it was one of the few words in which you heard the tongue turn a corner. Remember Dedo in the deserts of Libya? *A man shall be as rivers of water in a dry place*" (161).

Similar to the desert, the Italian villa San Girolamo is imbued with symbolic meanings. Characters come to the villa to seek out a familiar bond that is severed by national borders. In this shared place, they form a community, which was not mapped by national and racial boundaries. According to Papayanisin, the villa is

the nomad space of a small community of survivors bound together by their own exteriority to the institutional machinery of war, a community whose members, like those of the community of desert explorers, have shed the clothing of their countries only to find to themselves, in the end, back in a costume, undermined by an act of incomprehensible barbarity perpetrated by 'the West' against the 'East' (235).

In the villa love becomes a very important nexus that connects the characters together. Relationships, in this liminal space, undermine the notion of a homogenous cultural identity and suggests the possibility of a rapprochement between Self and Other. The metaphorical description of the villa suggests that, unlike the outside world, it is free of borders and divisions; "There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth. To Hana, the wild gardens were like further rooms. She worked along the edges of them aware of always unexploded mines" (The English Patient 26). In this villa, which becomes analogous to the Garden of Eden, characters forge a new community, which crosses barriers of gender, culture and geography. This community is cut off from the violence of the outside world, which is ruled by money and tainted with the stains of politics.

The room of the English patient, in particular, looks like" another garden-this one made up of trees and bowers painted over its walls and ceiling" (The English Patient 2). The walls of the rooms display paintings of a garden, which blurs boundaries of the external and the internal world. Its description as a garden full of trees and colours is a metaphor for the amalgamation of diversified cultures, which result in a hybrid and a rich culture. The room becomes a holy place, a fact which is emphasized by Hana's description of the English patient as a "despairing saint" (2).

Though characters in the novel have deconstructed the binary opposition Self/Other, the explosion of the two atomic bombs reestablishes this boundary, which seems to be invincible. As Boland states, "News of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki confirms for him the fundamental barriers between East and West, between the white and brown races" (27-28) The community, which is formed and celebrated in the villa, is sadly shattered by the explosion of the two bombs. This event shakes the relationship of the characters, who are bound together by love and boundary-lessness. However, this act of blatant racism does not deny the possibility of a hybrid/liminal space. It rather awakens the characters to the fact that national and racial boundaries cannot be totally blurred or transgressed, because Western aggression is an ever-present reality.

In his essay, "Borders and Bridges", Ngugi Wa Thiong'o states that knowing the Other might enlighten us, but one should never forsake his own culture. In his words, "What has been in the colonial context is that the act of interpreting the other culture that is far from us has, instead of clarifying real connections and each culture thereby illuminating the other, ended by making us captives of the foreign culture and alienating us from our own" (119). The quote illustrates the fact that despite hybridity, separatedness and difference are maintained.

After hearing about the explosion of the bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kip's relationship with the English patient, who typifies the whites, explodes in antagonism. He

expresses his scathing indictment of Western civilization as follows: “American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you are an Englishman”(181).

With equal forcefulness, Kip criticizes the envenomed abstraction of racial myth as follows:

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 perfects and reason some-how converted the rest of the world. You stood for precise behavior. I knew if I lifted a tea cup 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 (183).

Hence, colonial prejudices and racial attitudes are based on "Manichean" and "ethnocentric" thinking and self/other binary opposition. The colonizers and the white racists are obsessed with their chauvinistic and stereotypical claims of racial and cultural superiority. They define and secure their own positive identity and narcissistic self-recognition through the stigmatization and the illusory belief in the inferiority of the colonized or the blacks. They construct the term Other in order to colonize in the name of civilization. By exploding the bombs, the so-called civilized world proves to be barbaric.

Though he returns to India and begins life anew, Kip remains irresistibly drawn back to the days in the villa and mainly to Hana; “When does he sit in his garden thinking once again he should go inside and write a letter or go one day down to the telephone depot, fill out a form and try to contact her in another country” (187).The period of life in the villa is one of his best memories; “Now there are these urges to talk with her during a meal and return to that stage they were most intimate at in the tent or in the English patient’s room, both of which contained the turbulent river of space between them. Recalling the time, he is just as fascinated at himself there as he is with her” (188).

Despite the departure of the inhabitants of the hybrid world, the novel ends with connection rather than with rupture. At the end of the novel, Hana, in Canada, knocks a glass from the cabinet in the Kitchen. At the same moment, Kirpal Singh catches a fork in midair, which has been dropped by his daughter; “Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal’s left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles”(189).The ending of the novel is hopeful. It shows the possibility of transcending physical, political and geographical boundaries. It suggests a liminal/Third space, which is not physical but rather intellectual and psychological.

Wars, which lead to public catastrophes, are caused by individuals’ selfish ambitions and craving desires. Indeed, “the heart is an organ of fire”(60). This fire can be that of love or hatred. If it is of love, it will fuse and bound people together. If it is of hatred, it will shatter, blur and destroy.

Conclusion

Cross-cultural relationships, as the novel evinces, are not bound by national or racial boundaries. They transgress the traditional dichotomies colonizer/ colonized, white/black. Characters attempt to efface and evade their differences and divergences in order to survive and thrive peacefully. Despite their discrepancies, they share things, which cross all limitations and borders.

The novel reveals the possibility of a liminal space where substantial and fruitful intercultural and international relationships can be forged in a world which is characterized by difference and Otherness. Hence, the myth of a pure race or culture should be deconstructed. The English patient suggests the possibility of the mixed-ness, interaction or interconnectedness of cultures, the possibility of a Third space, which is likely to reduce or to prevent the detrimental effects of borders. The four characters are metonymies of peaceful coexistence of divergent cultures.

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