

## Issues of Identity in Michael Ondaatje's the English Patient (1992) and Anil's Ghost (2000)

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**Abstract.** This work strives to analyse issues of identity in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*. Issues of identity come to the fore when there is a crisis of identities, as it seems to be in these two novels. In both novels, the people's original nations are obvious. Like their names, or labels, nations are shown to limit characters' identities significantly. Nations also affect the reconstruction of identities. Ondaatje examines identity as both a "construct" and a "process". To carry out our work we have used a postcolonial perspective, and this, with reference to the theories and views of Benedict Anderson (1991), Homi Bhabha (1994), Franz Fanon (2004) and so on. It is divided into two parts: the first part focuses on the concepts of nation and identity and examines the different theories elaborated about these two concepts; the second part deals with issues of identity. It studies identity crises in Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* and analyses characters' identity reconstruction in both novels.

**Keywords :** identity, nation, reconstruction, nationalism, nationality, national identity, individual identity

**Résumé.** Ce travail s'efforce d'analyser les questions d'identité dans *The English Patient* et *Anil's Ghost* Michael Ondaatje. Les questions d'identité sont mises en avant lorsqu'il y a une crise des identités, comme cela semble être le cas dans ces deux romans. Dans les deux romans, les nations d'origine des personnages sont évidentes. Comme leurs noms, ou étiquettes, les nations sont montrées comme limitant de manière significative les identités des personnages. Les nations affectent également la reconstruction des identités. Ondaatje examine l'identité à la fois comme une « construction » et un « processus ». Pour mener à bien notre travail, nous avons utilisé une perspective postcoloniale, et ce, en nous référant aux théories et points de vue de Benedict Anderson (1991), Homi Bhabha (1994), Franz Fanon (2004), etc. Il est divisé en deux parties : la première partie se concentre sur les concepts de nation et d'identité et examine les différentes théories élaborées sur ces deux concepts ; la seconde partie traite des questions d'identité. Elle étudie les crises d'identité dans *The English Patient* et *Anil's Ghost* d'Anil

*d'Ondaatje et analyse la reconstruction identitaire des personnages dans les deux romans.*

**Mots-clés :** *identité, nation, reconstruction, nationalisme, nationalité, identité nationale, identité individuelle*

## Introduction

The theories of identity explain why a person, or self, at one time is, or is not, the same person, or self, as someone at some other time. Groups as well as individuals are concerned by those theories. Identity is largely determined by the relationship between self and other. Our sense of identity makes us identify ourselves as members of various ethnic groups or nations, as well as social classes. Communities like nations provide us with a kind of personal feeling of connectedness to our fellowmen.

Actually, people believe that they are part of one collective body, that is, a community known as "nation". Anderson (1991) defined this term as "an imagined political community" (6). Nations grant people with a sense of belonging, connectedness and identity through a shared territory which they believe they own and, therefore, are entitled to part from other communities' lands by means of borders. But the term "nation" expresses, in fact, an idea. It is generally agreed that it is of Western origin. It probably came into existence with the expansion of Western capitalism, industrialization and colonial expansion, which gave way to imperialism.

Besides, traditions, histories and symbols help individuals sustain their identity. Furthermore, nations' survival depends upon these elements. Among other sources of influences, Marxism, feminism and psychoanalysis brought about fundamental transformation upon the concept of "identity". However, identity mostly depends upon central elements like traditions and narration of history. National history narrates the past as a common experience that belongs to a whole community. That is why it is so important. It

displays one particular version of the past and identity of any given community.

The very concept of a unified imaginary community is the ground of nationalism. After the period of decolonization and, particularly by the 90s, the world was becoming increasingly international. As a consequence, nationalism, nation and national identity got less and less important. Colonized peoples of Africa and Asia, stimulated by Western ideas such as nation / nationalism and national identity, developed their own sense of nationalism and national identity, in opposition to the colonial, national identity of the West.

Many contemporary authors have devoted a large part of their work to the issues of identities. So has Michael Ondaatje, a Canadian poet and novelist in *The English Patient* (1992) and *Anil's Ghost* (2000).

*The English Patient* is set at the end of the Second World War. The story deals with the gradually revealed histories of a critically burned English-accented Hungarian man, his Canadian nurse, a Canadian-Italian thief, and an Indian sapper in the British Army, as they live out the end of World War II in an Italian villa. The novel questions the nation and nationalism that shape identities through colonial and anti-colonial nationalisms. It frequently breaks down colonial hierarchies, particularly the imperial conception of space / place through the mapping of the desert, which is an instrument of colonial domination, and the desert's elusiveness because of its vastness and uncontrollable sand storms.

*Anil's Ghost* (2000) involves the war in Sri Lanka, the writer's native land. Focusing on themes of human and civil rights, the book follows the life of Anil Tissera, a native Sri Lankan who left to study in Britain and then the United States on a scholarship, during which time she has become a forensic anthropologist. She returns to Sri Lanka in the midst of its merciless civil war as part of a Human Rights Investigation by the United Nations. Anil, along with

archaeologist Sarath Diyasena, discovers the skeleton of a recently murdered man in an ancient burial ground which is also a government-protected zone. Believing the murder to be politically motivated, Anil and Sarath set out to identify the skeleton, nicknamed "Sailor", and bring about justice for the nameless victims of the war. In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje dissects the secret enemies, identity, memory, family and turbulent past of a lush country caught in the throes of murder, betrayal and warfare. He examines and unfolds the intricate layers that make up Sri Lanka and its tumultuous inhabitants.

This Article strives to analyse issues of identity in Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*. Issues of identity come to the fore when there is a crisis of identities, as it seems to be in these two novels. In both novels, the people's original nations are obvious. Like their names, or labels, nations are shown to limit characters' identities significantly. Nations also affect the reconstruction of identities. Ondaatje examines identity as both a "construct" and a "process."

To carry out this work a postcolonial perspective will be used with reference to the theories and views of Benedict Anderson (1991), Homi Bhabha (1994), Franz Fanon (2004) and so on. It is divided into two parts: the first part focuses on the concepts of nation and identity and examines the different theories elaborated about these two concepts; the second part deals with issues of identity. It studies identity crises in Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* and analyses characters' identity reconstruction in both novels.

## **1. Nation and identity**

Pondering about identity, the first things that come to mind are all those traits, behaviour, attitudes and ways of thinking which are common to most of the adults comprising a given nation's population, as distinguished from those of the populations of other

nations. That is why it might be interesting to see how most authors explain the concepts of “nation” and “identity.”

### **1.1 The concept of nation**

The term “nation” derives from the Latin “natio” which means tribe, race. It generally means a group of people united by culture, language, traditions and common interest. But such a definition can only be tentative, as it simply accounts for how the term appears in everyday language, and suggests a few of the echoes it has in the social unconscious. Because of its numerous different uses, and the political, social and psychological importance it has taken on, the concept of “nation” stands as one of the most problematic word in political science.

In the Middle-Ages, the term referred to groups ranging from university students of the same area, the delegates of various European territorial areas attending the Council of Constance in 1414, an administrative area, a city and to the members of a guild.

The historian Federico Chabod (1967) explains that the concept of “nation”, in its modern sense, came of age in the eighteenth century when Swiss historians such as von Muralt and Bodmer put forward the defence of liberty and other Helvetic traditions. In the final half of the eighteenth century, the term “nation” was defined as a distinct entity which has particular features. Among these latter the most important were blood, territory and language. The concept was used by French Enlightenment thinkers, like Rousseau, to contest authority. With the French Revolution, legitimate sovereignty passed from the monarchy to the nation, as embodied in the National Assembly. During the revolutionary period, an active programme, which was considerably successful, set a sense of national community, for example by means of language, schooling and national ceremonies.

The defence of the Revolution, the Napoleonic victories and the reactive nationalism that took place in Britain and in many other

parts in Europe showed that, by appealing to the “nation”, a potent force for political mobilization had been tapped into by the French. The issue of nation appears to have been at the centre of political conflicts and developments ever since. Nevertheless, some signs might indicate that, in the twenty-first century, we are moving into a post-national age.

The idea of “nation” firmly took root in the Romantic period. It turned into a watchword of organizations and political movements. For Chabod (1967), “nation” can be understood in two possible ways: naturalistic and voluntary. In its naturalistic form, a direct identification is made with race and an integral form of nationalism for which nations stand as biological communities struggling against one another for survival. An extreme example of this view was, obviously, the Nazi vision. Under the voluntary form, nation is embodied in a group sharing traditions and language, as well as legitimate political aspirations to self-rule. The Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini (1972) wrote, in 1861, that a nation is a set of principles, beliefs and aspirations towards a common end, accepted as a basis of brotherhood by the great majority of citizens.

An idea of nation close to Mazzini's inspired Woodrow Wilson's 14 points of January 1918. In the aftermath of the First World War, self-determination of nationalities and a redrawing of European boundaries along national lines were advocated by Wilson. As it has been noticed through subsequent history in Europe and elsewhere, this noble principle is hindered by the very problem of determining what a nation is. Furthermore nations, however defined, often overlap geographically.

Over the past two centuries, many attempts to define “nation” have been made. Ernest Gellner (1983) sets two conditions for identifying a nation. First, two people are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture. Here, culture means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating. The second condition states that two people

are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation. Gellner's definition strives to get at the general perception of nation without reference to territory, history, race or other elements often seen as essential to a nation like border and ethnicity. The recent debate over nation puts Gellner in the modernist camp whose supporters see nations as inventions or constructs, entities based on perception rather than blood or history. Modernists argue that individuals come to believe they are part of a nation in response to schooling, propaganda, television, political leaders and so on. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991), whose title well sums up the modernist characterization of nation, is perhaps the most important modernist statement in this regard.

The alternative or primordialist view, more typical of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century thinkers, considers nations as real things, built upon common traditions, common language and a shared homeland, and that may have common genetic and racial features.

The position of the "ethnic continuationists" is regarded as one of compromise. These thinkers share with the modernists the belief that nations actually only came into existence in the past couple of centuries, but admit as well deeper historical roots. As an example, A. D. Smith (1986) identifies six components: a collective name, a common myth of descent, a shared history, a distinctive shared culture, an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity, which form the basis of an "ethnie", and it is out of the "ethnie" that a nation is formed.

## 1.2. The notion of identity

Questions of identity have always been central to contemporary politics and social sciences. There are good reasons why this is the case. Issues of identity are raised when there is a crisis of identities. And, indeed, such a crisis seems to appear in the last part of the twentieth century, and will last for the foreseeable

future. The crisis derives from a great deal of changes that run across the planet, particularly the richer countries of the North. These changes have caused the dis-embedding of hitherto more or less settled identities at both a personal and social level. The transformations are variously referred to as leading to a new period of "late modernity" (Giddens 1990 and 1991) or "postmodernity" (Lyotard 1986; Bauman 1987 and 1991) or a "new Global Age" (Albrow 1997). This new era is marked by rapid social changes which affect not only the highly developed countries but also poorer regions, all of them caught up in a set of forces drawing all parts of the globe into closer ties of interdependence and continuous social transformation on a scale never experienced before. Erosion by transnational forces such as multinational corporations and international communities such as the European Union have shaken the foundations of national identities, in many cases newly formed after struggles against colonial rule. The de-industrialization of the richer countries has caused the shrinking of manufacturing working class and thus the weakening of labour movements and working-class solidarities.

In the meantime, because of a greater participation by women in the workforce, but also the emergence of a "second wave" of feminism, gender identities have undergone a transformation. The loosening of previous forms of identification, especially those based around social class, is furthered by the actions of other new social movements, such as the Greens and gay liberation, which combine with the increasing significance of consumption in fashioning individual identities.

New forms of articulation between the global and the local give birth to what have come to be called "hybrid" or syncretic identities, particularly among young people (Rattansi and Phoenix 1997), a process aided by the formation of diasporic communities in the metropolitan countries. According to Hall (1992a), elements from a variety of cultural sources are combined by these new identities which are particularly evident in a complex mixing of

musical styles, literary genres and cinematic expressions. Young (1995) and Brah and Coombes (2000) explain that the exact nature and significance of this “hybridity” are a matter of some debate. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that ever more complex new formations of identity are going to be a more or less permanent global phenomenon.

The new forms of ethnicities and racisms in various parts of the globe are inevitably influenced by these changes. An acute comprehension of this arises from the elaboration of newer theorizations of identity in works by Hall (1992b), Rattansi (1994), Hall and du Gay (1996), Rattansi and Phoenix (1997). The intellectual influence of post-structuralism and postmodernism is partly the cause of new theorizations on identity. Thus, these latter are increasingly being conceptualized as more decentred, ambivalent, contradictory, provisional, contextual and de-essentialized than before. For Rattansi (1994), each of these elements can be seen to have a bearing on rethinking racialized and ethnic identities.

Decentring implies moving away from the notion of social actors as wholly rational and self-aware to a view of actors under the play of emotions and unconscious incentives as well as determined by relational elements. So identifications with and against ethnic and racialized groups seem to depend upon unconscious projections on to these groups, for example of sexual anxieties, as well as by the impossibility of individual identities to be defined except in relation to others. White identities, for instance, possibly occupies “the centre” only in relation to non-white, “Western” in relation to “non-Western”. “Self” is permanently haunted by an “Other”. Identities are therefore shown as not self-contained. This has established a view of white, Western racial identities as historically made up by a superimposition of such divisions as Christian/pagan, civilized/savage, male/female, adult/infant, rational/irrational on to a perceived white/black dichotomy. Such types of identification are seen as always the outcome of power

relations, and moreover relations in which the location of the second term in the relation, for example irrational or black, is defined inferior and more marginal.

Decentring can also be understood as manifesting itself in contradictions and ambivalences. Some consequences can be stressed: the complicated friendship patterns with otherwise despised ethnic groups as well as envy of and desire for the attributes of the Others that occupy the margins. Rattansi (1994) points out, as examples, the friendships among young people of different ethnicities, the ways in which black bodies function in Western cultures and the attractions of the Orient, especially its women, whether at home or abroad.

All the importance of context and provisionality is obvious in the changing nature of ethnic alliances, as documented by researchers like Rattansi (1992) and Back (1996) on schools and other urban locales, and the instability of racialized political identifications, as is evident, for instance, in the turnover of membership of extreme right-wing racist movements.

De-essentialization gives birth to a theorization of racism and ethnicity which stands as plural forms of identification. Race and ethnicity have fixed meaning but only for a defined context or historical location. They both draw on numerous features of individual and group attributes (skin colour, religion, regions of geographical origin, nationality, cuisine, language) thus leading to complex racisms and ethnicities.

The closure of identities, such as ethnic or racial identities, by processes of strict boundary formation, appears presently not as a "natural" or "primordial" fact, but as one which also is strongly influenced by strategies of mobilization. Ranger and Hobsbawm (1983) argues that relative degrees of closure are considered as, broadly, political achievements, secured by strategies such as the "invention of tradition", the rewriting of group narratives via "myths" of origin and other symbolic events, and the construction of

imaginary unities through media of representation such as photographs, film, music and novels.

“Social constructionist” and “mobilizationist” accounts of identity formation share elements with this framework, and have strongly influenced analyses of ethnicity, which they see, according to Jenkins (1997), as the product of active strategies of boundary closure. But, one must keep in mind how easy it is to exaggerate the extent to which identities are malleable. Actually, individual and group identities are characterized by stability as well as flux. Furthermore, Calhoun (1994) underlines that it is a common mistake to underestimate the degree to which identities, in the period before “late modernity”, were unsettled and subject to change. In the same way, Fuss (1989) lets us know that a number of essentialisms help anti-essentialist positions to make their arguments.

## **2: Issues of identity**

Names and namelessness are central in Ondaatje's problematizing of identity. One function of names is to provide verification. Names have the power to distinguish, substantiate and confirm, and above all they determine identity and set identification. To be named, therefore, is to belong, to be located. We will focus our attention on identity crises and reconstructions in *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*.

### **2.1. Identity crises**

In *The English Patient*, the characters are all exiles from their homeland. They gathered together at the Villa San Girolamo at the end of World War II. All have different reasons why their lives have led to the Villa. They are linked through World War II and their experience with trauma. Hana is a Canadian. This nurse, who has to have an abortion because the father of her unborn child has been killed, volunteered for war service. In addition to the news of her father's death by burns, her continuous dealing with the wounded and the dying put her on the verge of a nervous

breakdown. Leaving the Canadian Infantry Division which continues to advance in Italy, she dwells behind at the villa to nurse a dying burnt man who is called the "English patient". Kip is another member of the villa. He is a Sikh and a sapper in the British army. The last person in the villa, Caravaggio, a thief and an old friend of Hana's father, is an Italian-Canadian. The English patient is the central figure of the novel. His identity is already erased as he is burnt beyond recognition. Actually, he is a Hungarian Count whose real name is Ladislaus de Almásy. He worked as a desert explorer and helped the Germans navigate the deserts. He was in charge to delineate, name and in a sense possess the unmapped desert, which is a vast territory. By contrast, in the end, his own identity, which is the map of his own features, has been cancelled and he is seen only as the "English patient".

Plainly, colonial powers form oppressive social classes and organizations like the Geographical Society discover new lands for colonial domination. Almásy specifies also that colonial identity is narcissistic, ready to project its own identity onto anything it possesses as if it were a full, unified self:

When we are young we do not look into mirrors. It is when we are old, concerned with our name, our legend, what our lives will mean to the future. We become vain with the names we own, our claims to have been the first eyes, the strongest army, the cleverest merchant. It is when he is old that Narcissus wants a graven image of himself. (*The English Patient* 141)

Nevertheless, Almásy knows that colonial imposition of fixed meanings on space is meaningless due to the fact that space is a socio-political construction and named by given people in relation to their experiences and aspirations throughout history:

So history enters us. I knew maps of the sea floor, maps that depict weaknesses in the shield of the earth, charts painted on skin that contain the various routes of the Crusades. So I knew their place before I crashed among them, knew when Alexander had traversed it in an earlier age for his cause or that greed. I knew the customs of nomads besotted by silk or wells." (*The English Patient* 18).

It appears then that empires, nations and civilizations which constitute history are transient. Likewise, Almásy shows the transience and the elusiveness of identities:

There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I've met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, African, - all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we become nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations. The desert could not be claimed or owned-it was a piece of cloth carried by the winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and East. Its caravans, those strange rambling feasts and cultures left nothing behind, not an amber. All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape. ...Erase the family name. Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert. (*The English Patient* 138-139).

As shown, the desert stands as a metaphor that represents transience. It cannot be claimed, owned or defined. Hence, mapping it, which means ownership and possession as colonial notions, is meaningless. The desert, which is a landscape continuously changed by sand storms, refuses anything artificial such as borders or names. It is then a place of freedom where national identities disappear. The aim of Almásy's criticism here is Western nationalism or rather colonial nationalism which lays down artificial borders, through mapping and wars, simply for money and political power. Therefore, his will is to erase all national identities, set by Western nationalism as stable and fixed collective identities, limited to a single, domineering nationality that is responsible for establishing artificial borders that divide people. According to Almásy, the death of his close friend Madox is caused by nations. Actually, Madox killed himself after he went back to England during the congregation when the priest gave a sermon in honour of war. As a member of the Geographic Society, Madox naturally believes in Western nationalism with its jingoistic rhetoric of saving the world for civilization and human progress. But, like Almásy, his national identity has been erased during the

desert explorations and he committed suicide because he found that Western nationalism and national identity, by honouring war instead of civilization, had betrayed him. In the same way than Madox, Almásy also hates his own social identity of which Western nationalism is the ground. He is already made up of various cultural influences which demolish any final definition as he says: "Kip and I are both international bastards-born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere". (*The English Patient* 176).

Kip, the sapper, is also a character who presents an elusive identity in the novel. This young Sikh is a bomb defuser. The colonized he stands for has a double perspective because of his hybrid, in-between identity which hinders the binary oppositions of racist and colonial discourses. He has admiration for his commanding officer Lord Suffolk. He seems assimilated into English culture as he is re-named Kip although his real name is Kirpal Singh. All his mimicry of English culture is displayed as he sings the song: "They're changing guard at Buckingham Palace / Christopher Robin went down with Alice" (*The English Patient* 211). The one his friend Hardy would sing while defusing a bomb. English culture will be for him the source of disappointments. As a consequence, he will revert to his traditional culture as an anti-western Sikh nationalist, like his brother. But Kip joins the British army willingly, contrarily to his brother. This does not prevent him from being treated with reservations by his white colleagues yet. Lord Suffolk's household is the only place in England where he is unreservedly accepted. Lord Suffolk, who becomes Kip's mentor, trainer and surrogate father, is also a bomb defuser. He and his team are killed while dismantling a new type of bomb, which upset Kip. This latter is utterly disappointed with Western civilization and becomes emotionally withdrawn. Leaving England, he went to Italy to work as a sapper, where he meets Hana, the nurse, and the two become lovers. The Villa is another place where he is unreservedly accepted.

In *Anil's Ghost*, names and naming have real impact on issues of identification. Ondaatje shows how identity goes across cultural and national boundaries and encompasses both central and marginal positions. He studies the notion of identity as just such a construct and explores the roles played by syncretism and hybridity through the discourse of *Anil's Ghost*. The novel goes beyond interpretation as a post-colonial literature of "resistance" to challenge traditional perceptions of "Self" and "Other," incorporating and transgressing boundaries, calling for interrogation from a transnational perspective.

Anil Tissera is the central character of the novel. She is a female forensic pathologist who was born in Sri Lanka and educated in the West. She comes back to the country for the first time in fifteen years to investigate "unknown extrajudicial executions" (*Anil's Ghost* 18) on behalf of the United Nations. She is working with a local archaeologist, Sarath Diyasena. They discover a recently interred skeleton in an ancient burial ground which points to a government killing, a fact that endangers both of them. But Anil is more determined than ever to identify the skeleton she has given the name "Sailor". Ondaatje's presents Anil Tissera as a Westernized woman who has an adopted masculine name, which she "bought" for herself from her brother. She is also a scientist and spokesperson for the United Nations. All this shows that she is far from being what Gayatri Spivak (1988) describes as a "subaltern woman." (271-313) From a post-colonial perspective, she appears as a voice which not only breaks the silence previously imposed by an Imperialist discourse, but also speaks for those silenced by the neo-colonialist ideology that Ondaatje displays in his exploration of the war in Sri Lanka. All the contradictions and paradoxes that are exposed in human and cultural diversity are incorporated by the language of transnationalism, which Ondaatje speaks through Anil.

The cultural formation that Ondaatje inscribes in the character of Anil Tissera could be, in many ways, described as postmodern. The

reason is she transgresses the conventional notions of identity and boundaries of gender and position. Indeed, many ideological boundaries are crossed and re-crossed by Anil. But one must keep in mind that she does so with the status of a migrant returning to her once colonial homeland. This does not mean that Anil is empty of any national identity at all, but rather that her multiculturalism shows the possibility of a basic parity between various nationalist discourses, ascribing multivalency to each of the cultures she encounters. The transnational approach allows Ondaatje to uncover some of the clashes that happen between national cultures and the ambivalence inherent in a multicultural identity such as that of Anil's.

Anil's name, nationality and family ascribe to her character a "dislocated" position. Her transnational nature is a mixture of a variety of cultures continually changing. Ondaatje questions the possibility of a definitive view of identity or identification, and refutes the fixity of identity that is engraved in the neo-colonial action of naming. For him identity, personal or public, individual or national, is always provisional and shifting. The boundaries between real and fictional identification keep being crossed and re-crossed in his work. These lines of demarcation in liminal zones of namelessness and placelessness often surround the characters of *Anil's Ghost*. Thus these latter become situated paradoxically by their position as "dislocated."

Anil's feeling is that by trying to set the identity of the skeleton "Sailor" and discover the family to whom he belongs, she will be locating all those who Sailor represents: "who was this skeleton? ... This is representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest" (*Anil's Ghost* 56). In this framework, being without name is, indeed, being without an identity, a "lost voice" that must be "called" back into existence. "Sailor" is so an image representing all who are not able to name themselves and who expect others to locate them, or call them into being. A lot of the involvements of naming with respect to identity are shown in Anil's

defiant act of self-naming. Actually, "Anil" is not the name her parents gave her, but one that she earned herself from her brother:

She had been given two entirely inappropriate names and very early began to desire "Anil" which was her brother's unused second name. She had tried to buy it from him when she was twelve years old, offering to support him in all family arguments. He would not commit himself to the trade though he knew she wanted the name more than anything else. ... Finally the siblings worked out a trade between them. ... After that she allowed no other first names on her passports or school reports or application forms. Later when she recalled her childhood, it was the hunger of not having that name and the joy of getting it that she remembered most. Everything about the name pleased her, its slim, stripped-down quality, its feminine air, even though it was considered a male name. Twenty years later she felt the same about it. She'd hunted down the desired name like a specific lover she had seen and wanted, tempted by nothing else along the way. (*Anil's Ghost* 67-68)

According to Ondaatje, names and identities, instead of being fixed entities, are cultural and ideological constructions. While choosing a new name for herself, Anil takes on a new identity. She is now a "stranger" to her past "self", that is, to the individual she was before she became "Anil." Ondaatje does not tell the name she was known by for the first twelve years of her life. Until she becomes Anil, she is un-identified; missing a name, and so exactly like the nameless skeleton "Sailor".

## 2-2. Identity Reconstruction

The four characters in Ondaatje's *The English Patient* have travelled extensively and end up in a damaged villa in an unfamiliar country where they have to reconstruct new identities. But while trying to reconstruct their identities, in Italy, they undergo influences by the "world" that surrounds them as well as their own feelings, beliefs, memories, or imaginations. Actually, subject's identity is reconstructed through a collage of names, stereotypes, body image, the imagination, memories, relationships, environment, books, and history. Identity reconstruction takes place, regardless

of the characters' attempts to escape separate versions of their identities.

Before the bombing of Japan, they have managed to escape the "world" consequences by entering their own separate space in the villa. Nevertheless, each character's personal limited space is shared by three other people reconstructing their identities as well. This creates a connection between the characters in a way that only tragedy can do. But as they enclose themselves within of their own spatial existence, they lose conscience about the outside "world." So they totally withdraw from the world, since none of them are in the place they should be. In fact, Caravaggio ought to be recovering in a hospital in Rome; Hana was expected to have left the villa with the doctors, soldiers, and other nurses; the English patient should have been dead, either by fire or the actions planned by the Allies' Intelligence; and Kip could have wandered anywhere in Europe to defuse bombs. There is "no representation of them in the world" (*The English Patient* 112) but solely by word-of-mouth, by which Caravaggio finds Hana in the villa. Therefore "there is hardly [a] world around them and they are forced back on themselves" (*The English Patient* 40). The refuge they find is themselves and the community that they have built in the villa, the place where they temporarily escape. In a way, they set up a new community in the Villa, which is like Eden, isolated from the outside world of war and violence. They have left the "world" which is full of expectations and rules that they are unwilling to keep following. For instance, as part of the outside "world," which is represented through flashbacks, the English patient notes the distance that place and nations put between people: "If he could walk across the room and touch [Katharine] he would be sane. But between them lay a treacherous and complex journey. It was a very wide world" (*The English Patient* 113).

The Western residents in the Villa, namely, Hana, the English patient / Almásy, Caravaggio and the Canadian thief welcome Kip. Hana's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday is even celebrated, a symbol of their

friendship as they all seem to disregard their national and racial origins. In the villa which is a place of refuge like the desert, nations, races, anything artificial that divides human beings is meaningless. The inhabitants of the villa get new identities in a place other than their homeland.

The English patient is no longer a young man when he gets to the villa and requests a mirror from Hana to observe his burns. He wishes to die anonymously, free from what or how the world or society would label him. His belief is a name only carries the negative nuances and limitations of the past and present: "Erase the family name! Erase nations. I was taught such things by the desert" (*The English Patient* 139). The loss of his family name, and subsequently his nation, symbolizes the English patient's escape from an old identity and permits him to recreate a new version of identity. He not only uses his body to escape his previous identity, but also to create a new identity for Almásy.

Kip's "otherness" drumming into his head, as separate from a Eurocentric "norm," leads him to take a new nickname, and "within a week his real name, Kirpal Singh, had been forgotten" (*The English Patient* 87). By his submissive escape from his Indian name, Kip reinvents a new label and reconstructs a new version of identity for himself.

Nevertheless, in August when Kip hears the news of atomic bomb dropped on Japan, he becomes enraged, thinking that a Western country would never commit such an atrocity against another Western country. Kip also threatens to kill the English patient who, for him, is a symbol of the West because he believes he is English. His sense of cultural displacement as a consequence of his disappointment with Western culture explains his anti-Western outburst and his readiness to abandon his Western friends. As a hybrid identity with a double perspective, he looks at the picture of his family as he asks himself: "His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here" (*The English Patient* 287). Even though his friends call him "Kip," he is no longer Kip, but

Kirpal Singh or the sapper till the end of the novel. The medical doctor and married man with two children, in the last chapter, is "Kirpal." Nevertheless, he sometimes remembers Hana and thinks of her and seems to regret his decision to leave her without a word:

It seems every month he witnesses her this way, as if these moments of revelation are a continuation of the letters she wrote to him every year, getting no reply, until she stopped sending them, turned away by his silence. His character, he supposed. 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. (*The English Patient* 301-302)

As it appears, neither the English patient, as a Westerner, nor Kip, as a colonized native, have a unified, homogenous and stable identity. The residents of the Villa are displaced individuals far away from their homeland. All have endured physical and psychological wounds in different ways during the war both as Westerner and colonized native. They attempt to recover through their friendship while their old identities have dissolved even though Kip reverts back to his traditional national identity. However, because of his status of a colonized and hybrid identity, Kip is already an ambivalent character. He is like a mimic man who is, according to Bhabha "almost the same but not quite", for "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (86).

Bhabha (1994) explains that the menace of mimicry results from its "double vision" which betrays the ambivalence of the colonized subject (86). This latter can menace the colonizer simply by using the discourse of colonialism as a means of resistance or disobedience. The British Army trains and disciplines Kip who seems to have adopted English customs. But he, suddenly, rebels against the West and quits his Western friends because of his racially based generalization against the West. The same way all natives are categorized as inferior stereotypes by colonizers, namely,

“wild” or “barbaric savages”, he categorizes his friends as colonizers:

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? (*The English Patient* 284-285)

Despite Kip's uncontrollable rage, racially based generalizations, and his reverting to anti-Western national identity which seem essentialist and racist, the novel's post-national approach that emphasizes “the mutual transformation of colonizer and colonized” as the fundamental principle of “post-national / postcolonial ethics of hybridity”, as Gandhi (140) states, is not undermined. Kip, both colonized and hybrid, is already an ambivalent character torn between two opposing cultures. The end of the novel uncovers his thoughts of Hana and his family in India. He has true love and affection for his family, particularly for his children, but he is longing for her, even though he has not replied to any of her letters for a year. He frequently thinks of Hana and even wants to communicate with her, which can be interpreted as the early signs of his transformation to forge, according to Fanon (32), a new “social consciousness beyond national consciousness.” This would lead to the emergence of his post-national identity with a more pluralistic vision of the world in the course of time.

When she gets her name “Anil”, Anil Tissera ruptures the boundary between “Self” and “Other.” It is not only a new mask or disguise she merely takes on. Instead, she is recreated by defining herself through the trade with her brother. It is worth noticing that Anil does not take a name at random. Instead, the name she wants is one that she has a relationship with for a long time. The very name owned by both her brother and the grandfather she has never known. By doing so, Anil not only expresses her independence, but also identifies herself with her ancestry. She integrates her origins into her new persona. This is a demonstration of a syncreticity and

hybridity that is involved in the building up of identity, caught through a transnational examination of naming. Transnational perspective framework allows Ondaatje to construct Anil's personal identity as one that establishes the individual in terms of a "state" of self-hood. Therefore, the private persona is seen as a figurative representation of nation, and as such, individual identity is subject to the effects of transnationalism.

But there is a price to pay for the liberation from "other" into "self-hood." That is why, to gain her chosen identity, Anil trades what she possesses. The bargain is negotiated and agreed by both parties: her brother receives "one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eyeing for some time, a tin of fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found, and a sexual favor he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse" (*Anil's Ghost* 68). Furthermore, Anil "was considered a male name" (*Anil's Ghost* 68) and maybe accounts for a "masculine" side to her identity that can be seen in her choice of a career as a forensic scientist, one that is also seen as predominantly masculine. So, the construction of the character of Anil Tissera blurs the boundaries of gender. By naming herself, Anil defines the territory of her identity, her own "state" of self-hood, in what can be understood as not only a neo-colonial, but also a gendered, masculine, action.

The position of Spivak's gendered subaltern is demolished by Anil. Indeed, she rejects imposed cultural identity and the traditional role of the colonial female. Instead she is for a syncretic gender construction that assumes both male and female traits, and is transnational in nature, in that her individual "state" encompasses characteristics from areas that are traditionally constructed as either masculine or feminine. Therefore, the concept of Anil's gendered self appears to be multiple, contradictory and fragmented in nature. The reason is, in the book, Anil insists to "distinguish female and male traits as clearly as possible" (*Anil's Ghost* 137) in her work; she loves "being one of the boys" (*Anil's Ghost* 147) but also appreciates that being a woman allows her to

be “better at dealing with calamity in professional work than men” (*Anil's Ghost* 137). In terms of gender, McClintock (1995) argues “the peculiar freedoms of ambiguity rather than the fixity of one identity” (174) are bestowed on Anil. This point is illustrated in the business deal to secure the purchase of her name, where Anil has a behaviour predominantly stereotypically masculine, but pays part of the price as a “sexual favour” to her brother. Ondaatje shows here her subordinate female status prior to gaining her name, but also an ancient form of feminist resistance to patriarchal control. The barter of her sexual services makes Anil gain a measure of economic power and independence.

Through Ondaatje's work, it appears that it is possible to transcend or breach, if not remove, the divisions and boundaries between cultures. He demonstrates so by setting up the notion of identity as a process that requires continual cultural syncretism and hybridity, and by substituting the outdated idea of a fixed cultural identity with the emerging concept of one that is truly transnational. David Schneider (1968), cultural anthropologist, in his book *American Kinship*, explains that in American culture, any sexual act outside of the “husband-wife” relationship is seen as “morally, and in some cases, legally, wrong”; he concludes that “between blood relatives such an act is incest and prohibited” (38). It is true that this argument is specific to “Western” American, culture, but it is relevant here as Anil's transnational identity involves her complicity with the West. By deciding Anil get her name through an incestuous act, Ondaatje underlines that the origination of her transnationalism is the breaking of a taboo. So, to get the transnational status requires the transgression of the boundaries that makes the difference between us and them, insider and outsider, national and international.

For Ondaatje, transnational identity, such as Anil Tissera's, is not created through either “nature” or “law”. Instead, it is given birth out of the accepted order that is necessary for belonging to a single nationality. To realize her “transnational citizenship”, Anil

goes beyond the traditional modes of national identification. As a "Trans-national" then, Anil offers a figurative image of the feminized nature of the land as an object of desire, the "earth mother". But the fact that she takes possession of a male name indicates that she also subsumes something of the patriarchal role: "she'd hunted down the desired name like a specific lover she had seen and wanted, tempted by nothing else along the way" (*Anil's Ghost* 68). This poetic representation is reflected by Anil's name, her demand to define herself within and through that name, to name herself. Seen from a transnational notion of syncretism, her character is "hold" by her name.

### **Conclusion:**

In *The English Patient* the main focus is the erasure of the national identities and selves. The people involved are a group of European explorers, scientists and spies, as well as the colonized Kip, an Indian, serving as a bomb defuser in the British Army. The scientists are appointed to map the desert, but they can hardly achieve it. In fact, sand storms make this space uncontrollable and unreliable. The surface of the desert changes quickly and one can be lost forever. This is the metaphor of the unreliable national identities of the people mentioned above. Actually, their national identities are fragmented and varied because of their traumatic personal experiences in such an alien landscape and culture. Ondaatje emphasizes the fragility of identities and selves even for those who represent European civilization and Imperial Rule as hegemonic powers together with the colonized Kip who is shaped by these powers as a hybrid identity.

So, in the novel, colonial components and concepts such as nationalism and nations are questioned both in the form of colonial and anti-colonial nationalism. The terms in question are imaginary, essentialist and racist. They are the causes of the destruction of civilizations and the suffering of westerners as well as colonized subjects such as Almásy, Caravaggio, Hana and Kip. It is also shown that neither history nor national or cultural identities are

neutral and objective due to the fact they are not able to provide access to objective truth. As a result, instead of being stable or fixed, they are elusive. Both of Almásy and Kip have gone through a process of identity transformation. So the book offers a post-national / postcolonial reading of colonial encounters which lead to mutual transformation of colonizer and colonized.

The English patient shares with Hana the opinion according to which national identity is limiting. Almásy is the most active of the four main characters in opposing what nations, history, and places represent and how these constrain his identity. For him, nation inevitably means war and restrictions that force a large number of people to accept the ideas of nations' leaders, instead of permitting each person to have his or her own voice.

In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje problematizes notions of either individual or national identity as being fixed and immutable. He chooses a perspective that defines such boundaries as both flexible and permeable. Therefore, he puts forward a tri-phasic model of the process of acculturation, as it appears through the construction of Anil Tissera's personal and cultural identity. If Anil, initially, depends upon the cultural and individual identity given to her by her parents, she will move into an independent phase indicated by her desire for another name and her adoption of a different culture. She, finally, gets into the third phase of interdependency, when she goes back to Sri Lanka, setting up a multicultural perspective which is transnational rather than global or universal in its construction. Gaining her male name from her brother displays Anil's determination to define her own identity against society's prescriptive labels. She values her privacy and rejects her Sri Lankan culture, the strong communal ties of which she finds oppressive. In the course of a nomadic life and a series of broken relationships she has re-defined herself: "I live here ... in the West" (*Anil's Ghost* 36).

The text goes beyond the concept of a postcolonial literature of "resistance" and enters an area that demands a theory of process

rather than product. Transnationalism appears here to be just such a theory, in that it captures something of this fluidity. Therefore, the analysis is grounded in the application of transnational theory. Definitely, the consequences of war and place upon Ondaatje's characters are not only traumatic and limiting to their identities, but are, specially, part of the process of their identity reconstructions.

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