

The notion of identity in Michael Ondaatje's “The English Patient”

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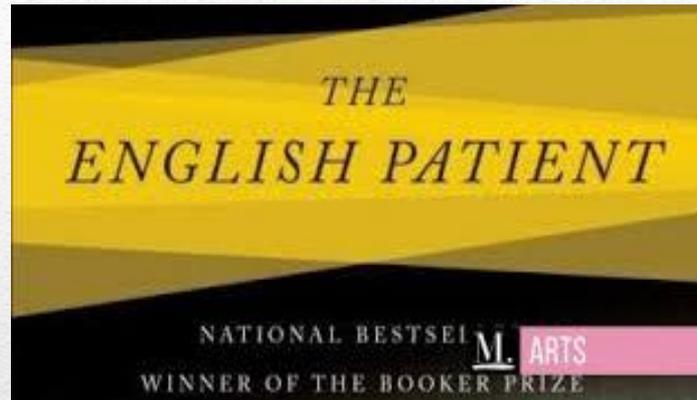
The notion of identity and its representations in fiction.

- As a society and culture are still preoccupied with its identification or rather its quest of defining the identity - **anglophone Canadian literature offers itself as a paradigmatic case for this notion of identity.**
 - A postcolonial novelist, a prolific Canadian writer **Michael Ondaatje** best known for his Booker Prize winning novel turned Academy Award winning film, *The English Patient* (1992), deeply raises the question of identity in his work.
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Sri Lankan born writer Michael Ondaatje gained Canadian citizenship following his move to the country in 1962. His broad range of work, which covers the territories of fiction, autobiography, poetry and film, has found its way into school curricula across Canada. Other notable offerings include *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), a fictional account of immigrants who played a profound role in the construction of Toronto but were subsequently blown over in records of the time period.

“The English Patient” (1992)



- The novel is a confluence of four characters Hana, a Canadian born Italian nurse, Caravaggio, a spy and a thief who is Hana’s father’s friend, Almsy the central character who also happens to be her well-wisher and Kip, an Indian Sikh who is posted at Italy as a member of the bomb diffuser squad.
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The novel takes place in a deserted Italian villa named villa San Giroloma and in the Sahara desert, Canada, America, England and Asia. All these countries are represented by bringing together characters from various nations with various identities and negotiating their multicultural zones. The aforementioned villa is later converted into a war hospital.

Reconstruction of Identity in Times of War Crisis

- Michael Ondaatje's "The English Patient" focuses on the relationships among four characters who have all been deeply damaged by World War II. All four characters were part of a war that has spread a disease, blood, hate, and prejudice. Therefore, the unifying feature of all four characters in the novel is their **loss of identity**.
 - All the main four characters of the novel are in the **process of re-evaluating their new identity** after the World War II.
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The Notion of “Other” or Relational Identity

- In philosophy it is suggested that self-knowledge is a project to be undertaken **in relation to the world and the others.**
 - The identity of the English Patient is the central concern of the novel, and the identities of other characters **are revealed through their relation** to the burned patient.
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The patient's lost identity, rendered inevitable by his burnt body, represents the multiple deaths and injuries which may happen in times of wars, the fact that neither the skin color nor the name may be key points for understanding, judging or validating the other.



- He defines his identity dialectically, his history – and thus his identity – is fictionalized later on in the nickname he gets after the plane crash: the English patient. The impossibility to attach a name to his fragmentary identity narrative makes it possible for other characters to assign multiple names to the suspicious unrecognizable patient. Each character leaves a mark about the other that makes the novel polyphonic.
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Hana compares the patient to a ghost: “A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire. Parts of his burned body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin. The area around his eyes was coated with a thick layer of gentian violet. There was nothing to recognize in him”.

Conclusion

- In “The English Patient” Ondaatje depicts the shift occurring in the colonial world after World War II. Multilayered and with a polyphonic structure, the novel do this research by looking at identity as a mechanism based on the relation to the *other*. Identity is constructed around the modifications that war brings into each character’s life, and is rooted in the subject’s inquiries into the past, as a strategy to comprehend a discontinuous present.
 - In Ondaatje’s novel, **identity is similarly relational**: Hana, Kip, the English Patient and Caravaggio come to understand their identities in terms of their war experiences. **The search for identity** looks like the hermeneutic process, an interpretation and reinterpretation of reality. The characters negotiate the meanings of otherness; they record the changes happening while discovery and rediscovery of the past rearranging their selves.
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**Thank you for
attention!**
