

National identity in nationless places



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Who we are is shaped by where we are from.

This is a common thread in the human experience; our backgrounds give way to our personalities. But what happens when a person disagrees with the confines of their nation upon their identity? *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje explores what occurs when a person attempts to break away from the mold of a homeland, and begs the question of whether or not misfits can find a place that is truly nationless, from which to carve their own identities.

Set at the close of World War II, the novel depicts a time when nationalistic tensions are high all over the world. There is, indeed, a heightened sense of national responsibility. And yet, the main characters in the novel are all trying to escape it. Hana, a young war nurse, hails from Canada. However, instead of moving forward through Italy with the rest of the nurses and the Canadian Infantry, she chooses to stay behind and care for a single, nameless man, who she simply refers to as the English Patient. This man is called “her despairing saint,” and as she cleans his naked, ruined body, she imagines he has the “hipbones of Christ” (page 3). It is clear she not only cares for him, but worships him, perhaps because he is the only thing that keeps her going. Though, unlike her patient, Hana’s body is intact, the same cannot be said for her mind. She too, is ruined: her lover and father both died in the war, and the impact of the loss of the latter has nearly driven her insane.

Hana no longer thinks of Canada, her homeland. To maintain a certain level of sanity, she focuses on her job as a nurse and her immediate surroundings.

Those surroundings are indicative of her mental state as well; she and the other characters reside in the Villa San Girolamo, a bombed out villa in a deserted, war-torn landscape. This building is unsafe: page 7 of the text states that in the villa, “ some rooms could not be entered because of rubble. One bomb crater allowed moon and rain into the library downstairs — where there was in one corner a permanently soaked armchair.” And this open air villa is not exactly giving way to a landscape of lush Mediterranean beauty, either; the countryside is literally rotting, and the post-war smell of decaying flesh is constant. However, Hana finds solace in the villa, in that the place is, well, placeless.

The English Patient himself desires placelessness. Over the course of the novel, we, the readers, slowly discover his identity. He worked before the war as a British mapmaker, but effectively committed treason when he used the knowledge he learned as a cartographer to smuggle Axis soldiers across the desert. Almasi doesn't care about the borders of countries or the fights between them; to him, every place is like the desert he spent so much of his life studying and living in — so easily and dramatically altered by the wind. He is so far removed from constructs of society that he has no nation. And yet, he is physically broken; so much so that his identity has been burned away. Could it be that the physical deformity that conceals his physical identity reveals to the reader the rift in his mental one, the space where an innate place of belonging should be? How crucial is place to one's state of being?

Consider yet another character, Kip. Kip is a Sikh Indian who worked as a sapper in the war. He had the dangerous job of dismantling unexploded

mines. Kip's decision to join the British Army was a complicated one; he was supposed to become a doctor while his brother served, but his brother, who was very nationalistic and despised the British Empire for what they had done to India, refused, so Kip went in his place. Kip does not harbor nearly as much animosity towards westerners as his brother, but he does notice that his fellow soldiers treat him differently because of the color of his skin. In true Kip fashion, he remains distant and apathetic about this behavior as well as the broader conflict of interest between the west and his homeland of India. However, when the United States drops the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the close of the war, Kip is moved. He knows these bombs would never have been dropped on a white nation, and he feels a surge of empathy and passion for his roots, his home in Asia. No matter how neutral he attempted to be, his relationship with his homeland never disappeared, and returned full force when he felt it had been irreplaceably harmed. Kip was thousands of miles away from India, but he couldn't escape it; a person's homeland travels with them in their souls.

Countries are just lines on a map. But the communities, peoples and governments within those lines have a significant impact on the crafting of an individual. That individual may try to escape, to mold their own identity regardless of drawn borders, but it is near impossible. They can run, they can distance themselves from their homeland as much as physically possible, but the absence of roots will only serve to leave them marred for life. And beware — even for those who think they have escaped, a single moment in time and history can send them flying back to where they belong.