

Overview of the english patient history essay



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Throughout the ages of history people have always asked the question ' who I am I?', what is my identity, what defines it. There are many things that can make up a person's identity, but it is what makes you unique as an individual and different from everyone else that really defines it. Or it could be the way you define yourself or the way you view yourself as an individual. The theme of identity emerges throughout the novel. And it relates to this penetrating desire for all the characters to either embrace, understand, create or destroy their own identity. This is amplified by the behaviour and the reactions of all the characters. The themes also relates to the ' inescapable' identity that happens when we are born into a certain nation. The main character that struggles with this the most is the English patient; we are constantly hearing him tell Hana how he believes that nationality deforms a person. There are three different types of identity that occur in the novel; personal identity, cultural as well as national identity and each character struggles with these in their own ways, and even accepting one nationality for these characters is easier said than done. Through the arising of certain situations and environments in the novel, Ondaatje brings one to form an idea that a person's national identity can be wiped away, and that it is in fact insignificant. For example places where a person national identity is unimportant to the people that one interacts with would be the Italian villa and the desert which are Almasy's favourite places, but they are also very isolated from the rest of civilization. The entwinement of both identity and nationality creates for the characters unpreventable links that tie them all to times and places and certain situations, despite all their efforts to avoid such imprisonment.

Hana is a young Canadian female nurse in the English Patient. And in the first chapter Ondaatje chooses to leave her completely name-less, a person with no identity. We learn that Hana was forced to grow up quickly, and in the book we can see her as being both a woman and a child. We also know that she arrives in the villa with extreme emotional baggage, from the scarring of talking care of all the dying soldiers to the death of her own baby it is evident that she carries great emotional anguish. This leaves her personal identity to be conflicted as we see her cutting off all her hair (removing her femininity) and absolutely refusing to look in any mirrors. Her father was badly burnt in the war, while he was in France and she in Italy, as we learn in the letter that she wrote to Carla. So she bound herself to the similarly burned patient. She has a very clear devotion to this man with no identity, because I believe that it helps her deal with the death of her very own father, and also because she sees in him the image of every man who has died under her care during the war. Hana does not care what side he is on, even when Caravaggio questions whether the patient is actually even English. Throughout the novel we see many examples where Hana performs many selfless acts, providing as much for him as she can. She has a very strong devotion to the patient; she reads to him during the day and keeps him warm during the night ' When it is cold at night, she lies in the bed beside the man with the injured skin' (5). Later in the novel, we also hear from Almasy about how the Bedouin tribe, provided layers of slaves to cover the ' man with no skin'. The one thing that people can identify you with is by your skin. So the English patient has to deal with losing one's own skin, of losing the natural bounding barrier between oneself and the rest of the world. But Hana continues to perform her nursing on this patient regardless

of the fact. This man, a man that is dying, a man without an apparent national or physical identity; a 'ghost'

The patient's anonymity, and his (un)readability, make him the perfect blank screen onto which the other characters can project their own devious passions. Patient, passive, he receives the identities they desire him to have. He is the English patient: the subject, that is, of a language, of a discipline.

Ain, Bir, Wadi, Foggara, Khottara, Sbaduf. I didn't want my name against such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert. Still, some wanted their mark there.... Fenelon-Barnes wanted the fossil trees he discovered to bear his name. He even wanted a tribe to take his name, and spent a year on the negotiations. Then Bauchan outdid him, having a type of sand dune named after him. But I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from.

The "mark" of the name is like an inscription on the blank page of the desert-or like a scar on the blank page of the body. So the English patient's desire to erase his name leaves him indeed name-less, professing ignorance of his own identity, and with his body reduced by fire to one all-encompassing scar. It is an ironic and bitter reversal of figure and ground: leaving no mark or scar upon the desert, he has become all scar, all mark. And is thus himself unreadable

As it is set just after the war, national identity is particularly important. When Caravaggio suggests that Almásy isn't English, Hana and Kip protest against this: to them, this would mean he is 'the enemy' and would call into question their affection for him. The relationship between Kip, as a citizen of

post-colonial India, and the West is also important. Unlike his brother, who is an Indian nationalist, he wishes for a world where nationality does not define people.

His only possession is a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus,

Relationships are seen as shaping identity. As well as Almásy's intense love affair with Katharine, the relationship between Hana and Kip is central to the book. Ondaatje emphasises how sexual relationships are expected to change us; Katharine is angry at Almásy because it seems that the affair will 'not change' him.

All of the characters in *The English Patient* are bound together by love and loss, by absence and desire. At the centre of the pattern, controlling it by her terrible absence, is Katharine Clifton, whose death forms the awful secret of the English patient's memory, and of the novel's plot. It is in their affair, presented in a series of short, intense, almost hallucinatory scenes, that the fire of the heart burns brightest. But her death becomes a literal fire, which burns away every trace of her lover's identity, leaving him as an anonymous patient in an English hospital. This anonymity, this willed (or faked) loss of identity, fulfils what had already been his conscious desire:

Everyday experience, a person's sense of their body and their surroundings, is also shown to affect identity. Unable to face the horrific events of war, Hana, Kip and Caravaggio try to live entirely in the present. Emphasis is placed on their explorations within the villa and their daily routines rather than past experience.

The book questions how much history impacts on identity. Although it concentrates very little on the events of the war, suggesting the characters' shell-shocked state, the book frequently refers to more distant times. This, and the frequent references to other literature, from Herodotus to Anna Karenina, implies that the characters' personalities are determined by a combination of personal experience and awareness of their history and culture.

More complex is Caravaggio's projection of desire onto the English patient. Caravaggio is a thief, but an unorthodox one, often distracted by the personal idiosyncracies of the people he is robbing. In a sense, he steals not so much their property as their identities. (In the earlier novel *In the Skin of a Lion*, there is a strangely evocative scene in which Caravaggio enters a house at night only to watch a woman reading by lamplight. The scene is duplicated by his first sight of Hana in *The English Patient*.) Working as a spy in the war, he steals and creates identities. "[H]e 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." It is this desire, for the theft of identity, that Caravaggio now turns on the English patient. Feeding him morphine in stronger and stronger doses, Caravaggio elicits a confession in which the English patient becomes the central figure in one of Caravaggio's spy dramas.

The English patient is cared for, by Hana, leaving him in a very dependable position throughout the novel. But he never feels sorry for himself I believe that this is because he is isolated from the rest of the outside world, a name-

less, burnt, identity-less man living in his own little internal world. His sole possession being that of a copy of the *The Histories* by Herodotus. His character is formed slowly, bit by bit throughout the novel. But of course the biggest irony remains is that Almasy is not even English, but instead Hungarian by birth. This goes to show how identity is weighed in the novel, and it demonstrates how citizenship and nationality are immaterial barriers that exist in society. The English patient is passive and easy-going, making him a perfect listener for all the other characters in the book.

Even though the English patient is not English, one can conclude that his nationality is completely irrelevant as all his beliefs and values are demonstrated, especially when he is fighting a war in the desert. The desert, I believe parallels with Almasy's identity. It is relentlessly always changing with the wind, an enormous and unmapped territory. The landscape of the desert is ever-changing, and yet still remains similar. The desert becomes Almasy's favourite place, it is inhabited by very few, he sees it as a place where people can truly be free and of course in his words it is 'nationless'. But the desert is also where Almasy developed his strong hatred for nations. Through his many story telling fits, Almasy mentions that he was a cartographer, a drawer of maps. This is very ironic considering that maps display boundaries based on where humans set them and the fact that Almasy hates nations and boundaries, because they display artificial boundaries that cause countries to fight over them. But wars are very rarely fought over deserts, because they are ever changing and thus have no boundaries, a place Almasy finds a haven.

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Ultimately, however, the characters cannot escape from the outside reality that, in wartime, national identity is prized above all else. This reality invades Almásy's life in the desert and Kip's life in the Italian villa. Desperate for help, Almásy is locked up merely because his name sounds foreign. His identity follows him even after he is burned beyond recognition, as Caravaggio realizes that the "English" patient is not even English. For Kip, news of the atomic bomb reminds him that, outside the isolated world of the villa, western aggression still exists, crushing Asian people as Kip's brother had warned. National identity is, then, an inescapable part of each of the characters, a larger force over which they have no control.