

## **The Personal Forever at War with the Public – A Study of the Patient(s) in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient***

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If one does not care to notice the dominant practices that contribute to the formation of the public, one is likely to offer resistance in order to rescue the personal. Those who intend to lead their life to fulfill basic necessities allow themselves to fall prey to some greater design (read disease). In the absence of any alternative, the personal reluctantly lends itself to be the part of the public, but the personal drag, howsoever infinitesimal, is potent enough to cause misalignment. If the public is construed after some structured system, then the personal can be held responsible for the misalignment. But when the public is supposed to be there due to some metaphysics, then the personal is expected to be steadfast to the metaphysics in fashion. And in so doing the personal adapts to living with an absence of ease (disease). The notion of disease is in itself a complex and enigmatic phenomenon. It is a condition one suffers from, a state one craves for, a temper one may fake, a mood one rehearses, a frenzy that catches unaware, a panic that sets on, and a resignation to what surrounds. Depending on the nature of disease, a patient must toil to acquire patience. The more one tries to understand it, the more one faces impasse. Solving this riddle is like sphinx’s thread that leads nowhere. Even when the term is well assumed and regularly used in fiction and reality, no one has defined it once and for all. Victor J. Schoenbach writes in “The Phenomena of Disease” that general definitions of health and disease involve biological, sociological, political, and many other considerations. These are highly contextual, therefore, any present attempt to rely on any definition of disease must badly fail if we look at who defines it, when and in what conditions and of course for what people. One also has to keep in mind the pharmaceutical companies in the market, as B.M. Hegde argues in his article “Disease as Invention”, that ‘invent’ diseases to run their business. Michel Foucault in his *Madness and Civilization*, from the European example, puts forth the theory of social construction of disease. According to him, disease carries with it the notion of social rejection and stigma. What is socially accepted – in terms of behavior, ability and action – is generally termed as normal. And anything that is deviant from it is labeled as abnormal, disability and disease. J.L. Scully in his article “What is disease?” calls disease

a historical term. What was considered divine punishment and thrown out of the town in the ancient times is considered a part of the civilization in the twentieth century. Therefore, “complete physical, social and mental wellbeing” (WHO, Preamble) is not possible as Rene Dubois in *Man Adapting* terms this definition a failure as “It [Health] cannot become a reality because man will never be perfectly adapted to his environment that his life will not involve struggles, failures and sufferings” (346).

This research paper attempts to explore how Michael Ondaatje in his novel *The English Patient* seems to question the notion of disease by focusing on clash between subjectivity of the characters and their objective national circumstances. The title of the novel suggests thematic presence of a disease. There are four major characters – Hana, a shell-shocked Canadian girl of twenty; the English patient, an anonymous man, burnt beyond recognition as Hana’s Patient; Caravaggio, a thief-cum-spy whose thumbs are cut by the German army; and Kirpal Singh, an English sapper who “had given his trust only to stones” (110). But the author has given the tag “English Patient” only to Almsy, a map maker, who is completely burnt in the mid-air explosion in the novel. Since all the major characters are either mentally ill or physically disordered, it becomes pertinent to question the very title of the novel. Therefore, the paper attempts to analyze, after all, who the patient(s) or the English Patient is. Does the term in italics refer to ‘of England’ or any disease named ‘English’ just like dengue patient, TB patient? Does the author sketch the characters in mental illness only to present a critique of English Nationalism? The answer to this seems to lie in the impact of national circumstances such as war on the subjectivity of the characters, Hana’s refusal to move out of the ruined villa Girolamo and of course, the behavioral patterns of the other major characters – Almsy, Kip and Caravaggio.

An emotional letter by Hana to Clara, her stepmother, who chose not to be part of war in any sense: “Though you, in spirit, I know are still a canoe. Still Independent. Still Private. Not a barge responsible for all around you”(310) gives in many ways clues about Hana’s disintegrated self. ‘Canoe’ is a lightweighted boat used with peddles whereas ‘Barge’ is used for heavy transport pushed by towboats. By comparing Clara with canoe and most probably herself with barge, Hana wishes to express the loss of agency over her own personal wellbeing and her state of ease. It not only leaves her feel burdened with traumatic events she has no control over, but also brings out a clash in her mind

and body between what she looks for as a citizen of a warring nation and an individual being. She further writes: “from now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public” (311). It suggests that Hana has become aware that her mind, like that of million others, would be a space of eternal clash – clash between the personal interest and objective circumstances forced upon by the nation. For her, thenotions of madness and rationality depend upon how well one live with this clash.

All the characters are swayed by what is considered normal in the public–to die for a “greater good”- an expansionist policy of countries wrapped in the fake patriotism demanding loyalty from people at the cost of individual well-being. In the novel, the characters are innocent victims of English nationalism for their participation in its destructive motives, because it is against all forms of humanity and world peace contrary to individual wishes for these two things for their well-being. Nationalism divides people on the basis of superior – inferior, white – black, rich – poor etc. Hana, Caravaggio and Kip served the Allies during the World War II – Hana as nurse, Caravaggio as spy and Kip as sapper from India. All of these get allured in hope of some reward in the name of honor, glory, medals and permanent job. In the hope of these rewards, Hana joined after her boyfriend and father; Caravaggio joined because the Allies offered legitimacy to his otherwise shameful profession of a thief and Kip joined because he wanted to be *pakka* in the army.

In the beginning of the novel, Hana is presented as a ‘shell-shocked’ person. According to Dr. Charles Meyers as quoted in “Shell Shocked” by Edgar Jones, it is a “psychological casualty” and “an overt manifestation of repressed trauma” (n.p.) that people suffer in experience with the death and the dying. Hana was pregnant before she joined as a nurse in the WW II. She had thought it would only be temporary and she would soon join her boyfriend and marry him. But,

As the war grew, she received reports about how certain people she had known died. She feared the day she would remove blood from a patient’s face and discover her father or someone who had served her food across a counter on Danforth Avenue. (Ondaatje 52)

She, a naïve mind, becomes vulnerable to the war trauma and loses her child in the womb while performing her duties as nurse. After the death of her child, she becomes cold to death and dying: “Hello buddy, good-bye buddy. Caring was brief” (53). The novel is not about war but about how the destructive

policies of a warring nation take away from its citizens the will to live and how innocent people become patients at the hands of a winning nation. Hana mourns at the loss of her innocence and her childhood. She is so much frightened by the dance of death that she cuts her hair that touch blood in a wound so that she has “nothing to link her, to lock her, to death” (52). She refuses to look into her image in the mirror for a year. Her repeated attempts to commit suicide by deliberately walking over supposedly mined area, playing piano and gardening with a furious passion “aware always of unexploded mines” suggests that she is mad and as she is living with a survivor’s guilt, she wishes to die (45). Ondaatje makes her wish very clear when she says, “I wanted to die, and I thought if I was going to die I would die with you, someone like you, young as I am, I saw so many dying near me in the last year” (109).

Kirpal Singh alias Kip is also shell-shocked and hyper-anxious. Overtly, he does not show any signs of mental illness but Ondaatje observes, “He had given his trust only to stones, moving as close as possible against them in the darkness...he would place his head on the lap of such creature and release himself into sleep” (110). This disease naturally takes him over as he is a sapper by profession and his job is to clear landmines laid down by the enemy. But his cause of suffering is not just his being a sapper, but his being a sapper from the colony working for his colonizer. Throughout his training, he is treated as second rate citizen. Ondaatje exposes his wounds by commenting:

In England he was ignored in the various barracks and he came to prefer that. The self-sufficiency and privacy Hana saw in him later were caused not just by his being a sapper in the Italian Campaign. It was as much a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of invisible world. (209)

Kip, what he considers himself at the personal, is never acknowledged rather mocked and made fun of. Therefore, he could never trust Hana and the inhabitants of the ruined villa. His failed relationship with Hana and the English Empire is largely a consequence of distrust and inferiority with which he is made to live due to the nationalist policies of England. Like Hana, he too thought he was fighting for the greater good of civilizing the non-European nations. On the one hand, he comes to believe what was considered glorious in the public and on the other hand, his personal beliefs get bruised because of it. The western world never accepts him with his brownness and religious beliefs.

Moreover, the protagonist Count Almásy innocently becomes the victim of western nationalism as the reader learns from Caravaggio that Almásy's turmoil begins with the entry of Katherine in his life. He never knows that he has been put into a British trap as her husband Geoffrey Clinton was sent by the British Intelligence. This is confirmed by Caravaggio, "Geoffrey Clinton was with the British Intelligence, He was not just an innocent English-man, I'm afraid (267) ... You had become the enemy not when you sided with Germany but when you began your affair with Katherine Clifton" (270). Caravaggio, who was thief by profession, loses his thumbs as a prize for siding with the Allies. The causality he suffers at the hands of war is his confidence- "I've lost my nerve" (36) are the words he utters when Hana asks him to steal for survival in the villa. He does not come to the villa to mingle up with others but to have a space to hide his own condition in the dark. Ondaatje informs, "He feels more comfortable, more disguised from her in the dark garden" (41).

But the question remains how the characters approach the psychological illness that results from the awareness that they are infected with disease of English nationalism. The story begins with the sense of mental disharmony and Hana's refusal to leave the ruined Villa for the "safer place". Her decision to stay back in the villa Girolamo can be read as a reaction against callous nationalism and against people silently obeying its rules. She refuses to leave along with other nurses for safer place as she has nothing left to keep safe; "Coming out of what had happened to her during war, she drew her own few rules to herself. She would not be ordered again or carry out duties for greater good" (15). Her approach is to reason out her madness by quarantining herself as she painfully becomes aware how her body and mind has become a site of struggle between her individual happiness and selfish motives of elitist governments. And she questions, "Who the hell were we to be given this responsibility, expected to be wise as old priests, to know how to lead people towards something no one wanted ... their vulgar rhetoric. How dare they!" (89). Kirpal Singh approaches the infection of nationalism a bit differently i.e. deeply cleansing the mind of everything English. He leaves the villa as well as his job. If Kip goes back to his country India, it is not that he reacts to one kind of nationalism to embrace freedom struggle of his own country rather he leaves everything English because his own faith Sikhism teaches him to work for the welfare of the entire humanity. In the moment of realization in Italy, Ondaatje makes it clear on the behalf of his character that "his name is Kirpal Singh, and he does not know what he is doing there" (305). Complete shedding of the

English is the only solution left for Kirpal Singh to decontaminate his mind and body. Caravaggio approaches the disease by numbing the psychological pain that results from it, Ondaatje writes, “he can return to no other world as he is, wearing these false limbs that morphine promises” (123). Almasy, the fourth major character, envelops himself in the past - an attempt to escape his present diseased condition.

From the above deliberations, one can aptly conclude that all the major characters – Hana, Kip, Caravaggio and Almasy – are patients and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder with varying degrees of symptoms such as suicidal tendency, hyper-vigilance, anxiety disorder, depression etc., all due to their affiliation to the English at various levels. They are unable to face the reality; they experience meaninglessness in present reality and therefore, hide in their own cocoons. Disintegration in the self caused by the objective circumstances in the form of war not only impacts their lives adversely but also changes their perspective on life. The novel presents a debate over the relationship of national and personal wellbeing. By becoming participants in the war, the characters realize how adversely they have been affected by the disease called English. This peculiar disease masquerading as honor, glory, a state of permanent bliss traps the characters, who once tempted, fail to break free of it.

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