

Postcolonial Literature

Hsu Shou-Nan

S10027028 Tseng Li

The Struggle for New Identities in *A Passage to India* and *The English Patient*

The theme of identify can be found in both *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster and *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje. The cross-cultural relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is well illustrated by both writers. ~~Despite the differences in terms of historical and geographical settings, plots and publication time,~~ these two novels have a lot in common and therefore are worth comparing. ~~They both present Indians from different perspectives, a western and an eastern perspective. When reading these two novels, I noticed that both of the protagonists, Aziz and Kip or Kirpal Singh are seeking their identities, especially new identities, throughout the story. As mentioned in Postcolonial Literature class, both of them find themselves standing with one foot in one world and the other in another and do not know which to choose. They go through different phases in order to become something.~~ I want to argue that ... In this paper, I will focus on the question of identity by discussing how the Indian characters of *A Passage to India* and *The English Patient* are presented. Then, I will explore what being Indian means to the individual native themselves and how the British presence influences their understanding of their identity. Finally, I will discuss how they choose their own life path and what might be suggested by the authors as a conclusion.

When reading *A Passage to India* and *The English Patient*, we notice that both Aziz and Kip more or less reveal their desperation to be integrated into the western society in their speech and behavior. We see the unnatural way in which they present themselves like

westerners. In both stories, they adopt western customs in the hope that they can become integrated into the western society. Aziz speaks authentic English, dresses himself in English clothes and behaves like an educated English gentleman. Denying his ignorance of the Marabar Caves, he arranges an expedition to the extraordinary landscape in order to prove to himself and his Indian friends that it is possible to be friends with the English. As the representative of India, Aziz is assumed by his English guests to know everything about India. The whole expedition turns into a demonstration of cultural misunderstandings of the Oriental versus the English. Aziz is terribly worried about the expedition to the caves in the hot weather. And it is not just the practical arrangement that worries him: “[T]rouble after trouble encountered him, because he had challenged the spirit of the Indian earth, which tries to keep men in compartments” (Forster, 141). By using an omniscient narrator and changing perspective, Forster underlines the emotions of both Aziz and his English guests: “Occupied by his own munificence, Aziz noticed nothing. ... They did not feel that it was an attractive place or quite worth visiting, and wished it could have turned into some Mohammedan object.... His ignorance became evident, and was really a drawback. In spite of his gay, confident talk, he had no notion how to treat this particular aspect of India; he was lost in it without Professor Godbole, like themselves.” (Forster, 153)

Similarly, in *The English Patient*, Kip managed to become one of the westerners by all means. As an Indian man serving in the English army, Kip struggles between adopting Western customs and losing his national identity. He joins the British forces during the Second World War as a sapper. This skillful sapper Kip, who gets his nick-name of fish from his English fellows, represents the mysterious Orient. To Hana this Sikh is a wonderful mystery, just like a character in one of the adventure stories she read, which makes her want

to get close to him, but it is not easy for either of them: “The sapper sat in the well of the window again. If he could walk across the room and touch her he would be sane. But between them lay a treacherous and complex journey. It was a very wide world” (Ondaatje, 113). The irony here is that Kip actually represents the British, being a soldier. He is in fact the only British representative in the limited space that the Italian villa and its garden create. He has found his identity as a sapper. He has assumed an English father in his mentor Lord Suffolk and followed his code “like a dutiful son” (Ondaatje, 217). Kip likes to sing English songs and listen to English programs on his radio. He also keeps his army suit on anytime and anywhere. Later in the story, In the Italian villa, Kip becomes a part of the small community that has sprouted there and begins to let his guard built from the war down. Although, he develops a romantic relationship with Hana and a friendship with Almázy, he still cannot fully open up to his western friends.

Through Aziz and Kip’s interaction with other western characters, we can see that no matter how hard they try to become part of the western world, in these two novels, both of them seem to be doomed to fail because there is always a boundary between them and the westerners. No matter how westernized they become, they are still inevitably viewed as the “Other” by the westerners. Perhaps, the idea of permanently being the “Other” also exists in Aziz and Kip’s minds, and gradually turns into anxiety. Despite the fact that the English visitors make efforts to communicate with the Indians, the expedition turns out to be a failure. On the return to Chandrapore, Aziz is arrested for harassing Adela. Fielding cannot believe this. He resigns from the English Club. The tension hardens between the British and the Indian communities. All the prejudice among this two is revealed. Adela, who came down the Marabar Hills covered in cactus thorns, has had a nervous breakdown. She cannot get rid of

the echo in her head. During the trial Adela is led through the events that made her accuse Aziz of attacking her. She suddenly remembers: "I'm afraid I have made a mistake...Dr. Aziz never followed me into the cave" (Forster, 231). She renounces her own people. She is left with no one else but Fielding to look after her as Ronny breaks off their engagement. Aziz finally wins and his victory is celebrated by all his Indian brothers. "It was a victory, but such a queer one" (Forster, 235). The humiliation in prison and in court has a great impact on him. After imprisonment and release he turns his back on the English. Aziz tells Fielding, his former British friend: "I have become anti-British, and ought to have done so sooner, it would have saved me numerous misfortunes" (Forster, 250). He decides to move where "Englishmen cannot insult me anymore" (Forster, 251). This fatal incident has a great impact on both of the Indians and the English colonizers.

Like Aziz, Kip remains "the foreigner, the Sikh" (Ondaatje, 105) among his fellow sappers that never become "familiar with each other" (Ondaatje, 110), needs a giant bomb to wake him up. In the last chapter, the atom bombs are dropped. This reality is too much for Kip, who has dedicated his whole existence to disarming bombs. Near the ending of *The English Patient*, Kip encounters a great impact, which knocks him awake from the delusion of being an English soldier, and opens an opportunity to "reborn." When Kip hears the news of the atomic bomb dropped on Japan as representation symbol of Western aggression, he immediately thinks that they would never have dropped such a bomb on a white country (Ondaatje, 286). This incident draws him back into the reality that exists outside of the Italian villa. His pain derives not only from the shattered lives of the Japanese people, but also from the shattering of his own identity, which turns out to be a rough duplication of western culture. The explosion of the atomic bomb also represents the destruction of Kip's entire faith

in the West, which he does all he can to protect it from collapse. He once told Hana about his brother who was in prison for defying the English: "... my brother thinks me a fool for trusting the English.... One day, he says, I will open my eyes. ..., and he is appalled at how we throw ourselves into English wars" (Ondaatje, 217). Kip's brother was right. This bomb can symbolize an eye-opener for Kip. Kip then approaches Almázy with a rifle in his hands. Kip find themselves on different sides and by accusing Almázy of bombing his continent he becomes Indian (Ondaatje, 285). Kip realizes the racial barrier between his friends in the villa and him will never be erased. His emotional detachment stands in the way of his relationships, most significantly his relationship with Hana. Kip cannot stay in the villa any longer, and finally leaves "the three of them to their world" (Ondaatje, 286).

The destruction of Aziz and Kip's ideals of the west brings them back to their true selves. Both of these two Indians need to be reborn. Although, the realization of the boundary between them and the westerners is distressing, both of them finds their own identity, or at least, their own life path. According to the final scene in *A Passage to India*, Aziz and Fielding are happily return to their previous selves, but these selves have drawbacks. Fielding becomes more of a typical Englishman, more supportive of the British Empire than respectful of individual interactions. Likewise, Aziz's affection towards the British fades way and turns into a kind of pride in himself and his country. Although, in the story, Aziz and Fielding genuinely hope to be friends, both their personal histories and historical circumstances block their the fulfillment of friendship.

As for Kip, after the eye-opening bomb, he resumes his past identity and turns it into a new one. Looking at a photograph of his family Kip questions his whole existence: "[H]is name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here" (Ondaatje, 287). In the

last pages of *The English Patient*, Kip is now “a doctor, has two children and a laughing wife” (Ondaatje, 299).

The novel has an ambiguous ending as the possibility of having a cross-cultural relationship is questioned again. The final scenes of both novels are pessimistic, but both Forster and Ondaatje leave the possibility for seeking individual identity without hatred against anyone. At the end of the story, Aziz and Kip fully see through themselves and the westerners. Their anxiety of becoming part of it disappears. They are no longer oppressed by the west, which enables them to enjoy being themselves. If they have the chance to meet any of the western people from the past, their interaction will probably be more balanced. The combination of a respect for people as individuals and a belief in sameness and the unity of people is the path most likely to lead to the openness and understanding that Aziz and Kip seek.

Works Cited:

Forster, E. M.. *A Passage to India*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000. Print.

Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. London: Picador. 1992. Print.