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### **THE NOTION OF IDENTITY IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S "THE ENGLISH PATIENT"**

This paper focuses on the notion of identity and its representation in fiction, in particular, in **Michael Ondaatje's "The English Patient."**

"Identity" in its current, historically novel complex of meanings derives most of all from Erik Erikson's works in the 1950s. Under the influence of postmodernism and debates over multiculturalism, the late 1980s and 1990s found historians, anthropologists, and most of all humanities scholars relying ever more heavily on "identity" as they explored the cultural politics of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and other social categories. All these categories respond to different **types of identity** such as: personal (individual), national, cultural, ethnical, social and others.

Postmodern identity theories demonstrate fragmentation, partiality, annoyance of ego identity in the modern era, along with its decomposition and inability of the individual to solve the problem of integrity and homogeneity of its own personality. In the literature of the postmodern period, a lot of works are about the crisis of identity. At the same time, this era is called the period of personalization and personal self-determination.

In the context of a global quest for identity, both Canadian multicultural society in general and Anglophone Canadian literature, in particular, provide examples of multiple identities, including its processual development and changes.

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 issue of identity in his works. 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 plot of the novel "The English Patient" takes place in a deserted Italian villa named villa San Giroloma and in the Sahara Desert, Canada, America, England and Asia. All these countries and territories 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. 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, Almasy, 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.

## FICTION THROUGH THE AGES

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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.

In philosophy, it is suggested that self-knowledge is a project to be undertaken **in relation** to the world and the others. 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 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.

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.

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" [1, p. 48].

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 the novel, **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.

### References:

Ondaatje M. (2004). *The English Patient*. Bloomsbury.