

## “An Earth without Maps”: Antony Minghella’s *The English Patient*

Behnaz Niroumand<sup>1,\*</sup>; Hossein Pirnajmuddin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Allameh Tabatabaee, I. R. Iran.

<sup>2</sup> English Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan, I. R. Iran.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 1 Decemeber 2011; accepted 18 February 2012.

### Abstract

This article attempts to look at Minghella’s film from a postcolonial perspective and tries to answer the following questions: How does Minghella challenge the dominant cliché ideas about the non-British people? How does Minghella present the hybridity of the postcolonial societies as inevitable? And how does he deal with the idea of transnationality in his film adaptation of Michael Ondaatje’s novel? The researchers probe the way Minghella, using cinematic techniques, debunks the dominant cliché features attributed to the non-Europeans, and subverts the status of a fixed binary separation between the English and the non-English people. Moreover, Minghella insists on the construction of a heterogeneous community in the two settings he depicts in his film, i.e. deserts of Africa, and the Italian monastery. The inscription of such heterogeneity, it is argued, functions as a strategy of resistance to the Euro-centric notions of national purity in the Western canon. Finally, Minghella presents transnationality as an ideal state hardly realizable in world affairs.

**Key words:** Antony Minghella; Heterogeneity; Hybridity; Michael Ondaatje; Postcoloniality; *The English Patient*; Transnationality

Behnaz Niroumand, Hossein Pirnajmuddin (2012). “An Earth without Maps”: Antony Minghella’s *The English Patient*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 4(1), 135-142. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320120401.1710> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120401.1710>

### INTRODUCTION

Before 1970s there was no field of study known as “post-colonial studies” (Lazarus, 2004, p.1). But in the late twentieth century colonial and postcolonial studies became a discipline for the study of literature produced in or about postcolonial societies. Postcolonial literary studies are, in a broad sense, concerned with any work written or filmed in European languages, which “adopts, adapts, and often rejects European models” (Smith, qtd. in Lazarus, 2004, p.244)

Although colonial experience was not the same everywhere, in opposition to the prevalent notions in Western literary canon, postcolonial writers produced literary works which shared such features as ambivalence, mimicry, hybridity, crisis of identity, cultural difference, and finally the notion of cross-culturality. Postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha have argued that in contrast to Western thought which puts the basis of any interaction between the European and the non-European people on a fixed binary opposition -- with one side, i.e. the West, always dominating the other -- postcolonial writers have tried to shake the stability of such dichotomies, and challenge the idea of purity of cultures. They do so by insisting on the mutual relation between the colonizer and the colonized. Such theorists believe that in their relation the colonizer and the colonized mutually, or rather dialectically, construct each other’s identity, hence ambivalence.

Ambivalence, which is a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion by somebody or something, produces a kind of mimicry that, since it is not a pure copy, changes to mockery. This status reflects back a distorted image of the center, therefore challenging its authority. Such mimicry and ambivalence construct a hybrid identity, which as Bhabha says, “is new, neither

this, nor the other,” but something else produced in an in-between space -- “the Third Space of enunciation” (1994, p.36-39). It is in this space that different cultural groups, while simultaneously keeping their own differences, and “contain[ing] the traces of other meanings and identities” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2000, p.61), come to form a kind of union of “coalition” (Bhabha, qtd. in Leitch, 2001, p.2378). Construction of such a cross-cultural community seems a resistance to the Western notion of group purity. This is the issue we are going to look into in this article as far as the film version of *The English Patient*, Michael Ondaatje’s famous novel, is concerned.

There was a time when reading was essential. But since mid 1950s people have been exposed to film as a visual medium (Ferrell, 2000, p.36). Although some may regard literature and film as two quite distinct media, as Dick observes, “a film can be subjected to the same criteria as a work of literature” (ibid., p.247), and its form, imagery, symbolism, etc. can be analyzed like a literary work. Ingmar Bergman, too, declares that although “film has nothing to do with literature,” film and literature share many features and techniques that bring them closer together (qtd. in Dick, 2002, p.247). Film and fiction, the specific literary form with which we are concerned, are both analyzed in terms of their form, rhythm, and imagery, although they are certainly used in different ways in these art forms. For instance, imagery in film is visual while in fiction it is verbal. Whereas rhythm in film is shown in the way it is edited, in fiction it is intimated through the modulations of dialogue. Whereas the form of a film is derived from both its written screenplay, and some manipulations of the scene in the text of the screenplay, fiction involves written language. Therefore, putting their particular differences aside, film and fiction share many similarities that let us consider both as literary texts (ibid.).

Moreover, film is considered by many to be an important art form, perhaps the seventh of the art forms, which has become the focus of worldwide attention because of its power of visualization. As V.I. Pudovkin maintains, “Between the natural event and its appearance on the screen there is a marked difference. It is *exactly this difference that makes the film an art*” (qtd. in Ferrell, 2000, p.37). That is, the same way that the author of a literary work uses literary devices to develop his/her theme, a film director also uses cinematic techniques to convey his meaning. In Bernard F. Dick’s classification, a film can be studied in various ways, i.e. thematically, that is to relate the theme of different films; analytically, that is to study individual films in detail, discussing themes, techniques and responses; historically, and generically (2002, pp.211-12). We have tried to look at Minghella’s film analytically from a postcolonial perspective. The relevant notions traced in the film include the subversion of the dominant binaries or hierarchies, the concept of hybridity, and the question of nationality/transnationality.

Anthony Minghella (1954 - 2008), was an English film director, playwright and screenwriter. In 1996-7, he won the Academy Award for Best Director for *The English Patient* which also won 6 BAFTA Awards for Best Film, Golden Globe Award for Best Director, and received 9 Oscars. There has been many reviews of Minghella’s cinematic adaptation of *The English Patient*. Jennifer A. Fremlin in an article in *The Journal of African Travel-Writing* discusses the idea of nationality as unviable for the characters of this novel and film due to the aftermath of the Second World War and the conflicts of borders (1997, p.86).

Gerry Coulter in his “The poetry of Reversibility and the Other in *The English Patient*” argues that Minghella’s *The English Patient* strongly rejects the cinematic denial of otherness. It rejects the rigid traditional boundaries of center/margin and marginalizes the center in order to reinforce the inevitability of the idea of reversibility versus the fixed centers. The film drives the spectators to accept the idea of Otherness as inseparable from their lives. In fact, in today’s world, margin and center no longer exist as specifiable boundaries. Moreover, using Baudrillard’s ideas, Coulter discusses the disappearance of history in this film, a history which he regards as “a kind of luxury the West has afforded itself [...] a history which is not the history of the other” (Coulter, 2009).

According to Hsuan L. Hsu in “post-Nationalism and the Adulteration of Vision in *The English Patient*”, Minghella aligns imperialism with the cinematic apparatus. Minghella’s post-national romances and extra-marital bonds between Almsy and Catherine, and Hana and Kip metaphorically represent the international alliances. With reference to the etymological derivation of the word “adultery” from ad-alter which connotes a tendency “towards an Other”, Hsu argues that the adulterous relation between Minghella’s major characters represents an escape from the pre-destined boundaries. However, such attempts to transgress the social and national boundaries mostly fail.

In what follows we will focus on the central issues of racial otherness, national identity and hybridity in the film.

---

## SUBVERSION OF THE DOMINANT BINARY OPPOSITIONS

---

In the twentieth century, the cinema has functioned as the dominant medium of mass popular culture. As regards the representations of the non-westerns in the western – which mostly means American – cinema, what is called orientalist discourse is well manifest. The cliché attributes once ascribed to the American Indians in Westerns, for instance, is now associated with Muslims in Hollywood films. For example, Muslims are now often represented as terrorists; or, “the Arab is associated either with lechery or blood-

thirsty dishonesty” (Said 1995, p.286). To Said Orientalism was a discipline through which Europe came to know the Orient (ibid., p.41). But the ‘knowledge’ the Orientalists produced was articulated with power. Because “the Orient that appears in Orientalism...is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later Western empire” (ibid., pp.202-3). The easterners were represented in terms of persisting orientalist motifs, as, for instance, irrational, childlike, backward, and ‘different’ and the Europeans as rational, mature, and ‘normal’. In fact the Orient was always imaged as intellectually subordinate to the West. These images were disseminated through a large body of Western writing, literary and non-literary, from the eighteenth century up to the present as general realities about all Orientals (ibid., p.66).

In fact, to Said the role of Orientalism is nothing more than intensifying the sense of difference between “the European” and the “Asiatic” parts of a world in which “imperialism, racism, and ethnocentricism” are offered by human societies as the only ways for dealing with “other” cultures (ibid., p.204). As Ashcroft et al. emphasize, the existence of colonialism and the empire depended on a hierarchical relation that divided the world into a master binary opposition: “the colonized existed as the other of the colonizing culture” (2000, p.36). If the colonizers were regarded, for instance, as wise, truthful, and superior, the colonized, since supposedly different from their masters, were imaged as stupid, liars, and inferiors. What Orientalists are worried about, as can be implied from their writings, is not the destruction of Western civilization, but the erosion of the boundaries that separate the East and the West (Said, 1995, p.263).

However, Minghella, as an English director with Italian decent, has tried to deconstruct the cliché images of non-Europeans in the works of the Western writers or filmmakers. Minghella’s *The English Patient* (1996) is the story of the affair between the protagonist, Count Almasy, with a married English woman, Katharine Clifton, while he is on his expedition in the deserts of Africa before the outbreak of World War II. Almasy, who is referred to as the English *patient* throughout the film because of his burns caused after his plane, belonging to the British army, is shot down by the German troops in the deserts of Africa, tries to recall his past in the desert. This we see through many flashbacks while he is spending the last months of his life in a vacant monastery with three other characters: Hana, a Canadian nurse who is taking care of the patient in the same monastery in Florence almost after the end of World War II; Cravaggio, a Canadian thief who has come to this monastery to look for the person whose betrayal led to Cravaggio’s losing his thumbs, i.e. Almasy; and Kip, who comes there with his English assistant, Hardy, to clear the areas of unexploded bombs and mines left during the war between the English and the Germans

at the end of World War II.

The vacant monastery becomes a dwelling place for the four of them to come together, know each other, and experience a new life away from the war disasters. What keeps them together is the existence of the English patient, to whose nursing Hana dedicates herself. While Almasy is reviewing his past love affair with Katharine and the circumstances leading to his present condition, Cravaggio makes him admit to his true identity as a Hungarian count, not the English agent others believed him to be. Meanwhile, Hana and Kip become emotionally attached. However, the relation ends quickly as Kip is to leave for another war zone for other bomb disposals. The English patient who has come to the end of his story by that time, asks Hana to give him an overdose of morphine letting him sleep, perhaps forever. After his death Hana packs up and leaves to join the military troops who are expecting her to return to their field hospital. It is Cravaggio and his wife who give her a ride to there.

Minghella’s film starts with some parallel shots between the desert scenes where a man falls from a shot plane into the sands, badly burnt, and the scenes in the wagons of a train carrying the wounded soldiers to Italy. In the former scenes, i.e. those in the desert, the Bedouins or desert people, i.e. Arabs, carry the burnt Almasy very considerately on the back of a camel to their tribe doctor who using spices, while confidently singing a folk song, heals the completely burned skin of the patient. In the latter scenes, on the train where Hana is serving as a nurse, however, Hanna opens the door of the surgery room and we hear a voice asking anxiously, “Where is the doctor?” and the second voice answers desperately, “Don’t ask” (min. 5). Arabs are shown to be more competent in curing the sick than the whites. This subversion of the past binaries is also affirmed when Kip, a Sikh Indian, is the leader in a sapper unit with an Englishman, Hardy, as his sergeant. That is, an Indian is put in the position of priority. Moreover, Kip’s competence is reaffirmed when Hardy takes Kip to defuse a very big bomb at the base of a bridge, and he does so successfully. Therefore, Kip’s character instances the debunking of Kipling’s idea that “India should be ruled by the British” (the name ‘Kip’ could be suggestive in this context), for this is an Indian who is helping the British clear the war areas of unexploded mines and not vice versa. Kip is the one who rules in his unit as the British sappers follow his commands. As such, the clichés of the non-Europeans as stupid and incompetent are undermined. In contrast to such characterization of Kip as a man of action and duty, the English Geoffrey Clifton is depicted as just a pleasure-seeking man. As Jonathan Coe believes the film, *The English Patient*, “provides a critique of Britishness”(Coe, 1997).

In fact, being mostly faithful to the letter and spirit of Ondaatje’s novel, Minghella depicts some major

English characters who break the rigid and fixed binary divisions between the European and the non-European people by giving voice to their rejection of the dominant Eurocentric binaries. For example, both Katharine and Madox are dynamic characters. Although Madox in one of the expedition gatherings disregards Almasý's right to express himself, saying, "You are Hungarian. You can't disagree" (min. 36), it is he who at the end of the film, when saying goodbye to Almasý tells him of the insignificance of nationality: "We didn't care about countries, did we? Birits, Arabs, Hungarians, Germans. None of that mattered, did it? It was something finer than that" (min. 126). Living in the desert changes Madox's attitude of looking down upon people other than English. Katharine's personality changes too. In their first meeting when Almasý tells Katharine that "whatever adjective you put in front of a thing, the thing itself does not change", Katharine disagrees by giving an example, saying "love, romantic love, platonic love, quite *different* things" (min.23)(emphasis added). However, she is the one who, when dying, writes "we are real countries, not the boundaries drawn on maps, the name of powerful men... I'd love to walk on *an earth without maps*" (min. 152) (emphasis added). The desire for a world 'without maps,' expressed by a member of a cartographic expedition, is ironically poignant. She is not after differences and distances any more, rather seeking unison. This dream of unison supports Almasý's idea that "a thing is itself a thing, no matter what you put in front of it." This is the dream of transnationality.

In his cinematic adaptation Minghella has tried to further highlight the attempt made by the writer of the novel to question and invalidate the Western binary divisions. In the main sequences that run throughout the film, whether in the desert areas or in the monastery in Italy, we see a violation of absolute divisions and distinctions between the English and the non-English people. In the expedition gatherings in the desert or in Christmas parties in Cairo, the people who have gathered to enjoy their time are not just English people. They are Arabs, British, Hungarians, and Germans, and as English Madox confirms, apparently they do not care about it (min.46). Against the Eurocentric and colonialist impulse of homogeneity, Minghella throws into high relief scenes of heterogeneity throughout the film. The first night that the Cliftons arrive in the deserts of Cairo, the expedition team gathers round a fire, dancing, singing, and laughing. Geoffrey, Katharine, Madox and Berman are English, Almasý is Hungarian and Foaud is Arab. Although their small community of desert researchers and map drawers is not a homogeneous one, they are at ease with each other. Moreover, cinematically speaking, the circle in which characters sit in round the fire in the desert, memorably shot by Minghella is significant as it is symbolic of unity and community. Minghella's technique is to bring to the

fore such communal scenes.

Related to this crossing of racial and national boundaries is the motif of ownership and Almasý's rejection of it. Almasý hates ownership. His impressive monographs, which Katharine refers to as describing the desert with so few adjectives, are suggestive here. When Katharine appreciates and expresses her wonder at how Almasý could use so few adjectives for such long descriptions, he reluctantly replies: "a thing is still a thing, no matter what you place in front of it" (min.22). That is, he does not want the words to be bound to any adjectives. Even words should be free of boundaries, let alone human beings; a man is still a man, no matter whether you call him an English man, a German, or an Arab. He reasserts this idea when Katharine asks him what he hates most, and he answers: "ownership, being owned" (min.75). However, the ownership that Almasý escapes from, before falling in love with Katharine has a deeper symbolic implication than that of a marital bondage. It is the ownership on whose refutation the whole film hinges; for the anti-colonialist ethos of the film means challenging the will to 'own' and control the rest of the world by drawing boundaries (the symbolism of 'maps'), by making a binary division between "us" and "them" and attributing superiority, and the right to command, to one side of this polarizing line and inferiority, and the obligation to obey and serve, to the other side. Almasý tries to escape the nets of such ownership. He and his team form an expedition group for the British Geographical Society in North Africa to draw maps of deserts and revive the lost oasis and caves. But when Madox tells him that the government needs the maps because if you have the maps "you own the desert, you own North Africa" (min.101), Almasý ridicules the idea. Minghella's technique of starting the film with the camera fading into a sweeping span of the desert landscape, unspoiled by man-made boundaries, and ending it with the same view of a vast, undivided desert intimates the theme of the ideal state of nature undivided by imperialist/colonialist boundaries as well as the pettiness, and fragility, of the dreams of imperial power in the face of time and the vastness of African deserts. The indelibly shot scene is reminiscent of, among other things, Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" and its mocking of the dreams of power.

Meanwhile, restoring the ideal pre-colonialism state is itself something of a dream. Minghella gives us a view of the sweeping span of the vast desert lands, both at the beginning and at the end of the film, from a plane high in the sky. And as Almasý himself once tells Madox, "You cannot explore from the air. If you could explore from the air life would be very simple" (min. 23). But of course life for the oppressed is not that simple. The real, as opposed to the ideal, aspect of life of the marginal people is presented in the parallel shots, in the desert and in Italy, at the beginning of the film. The crosscut from the hooves

of the camels moving in a line in the desert sands to the shot in which the soldiers' vans are moving in a line is highly significant. The juxtaposition of these scenes shows the present state of people in many parts of the world as controlled and driven by imperialist/colonialist powers. In the desert scenes, the camels are following the camel riders, the same way that in its parallel scenes in Italy we see vans of soldiers are driving towards a destiny shaped by the imperial powers. The position of soldiers serving imperial wars is likened to that of the camels driven by their owners.

Paralleling these scenes, Minghella illustrates not only how the wish for "not being owned" does not come true, but also how the issue of belonging deeply wounds some of the characters in the film. Cravaggio loses his thumbs because of being branded as an English spy by the Germans, that is, his belonging to the British army causes this wound. Similarly, Almasy, after three days of walking in the desert to find some help to rescue Katharine in the cave, is knocked unconscious by the British officers, because he is branded a German, when he tells them his German-sounding surname, Count La'szLo de Almasy. This being taken to belong to the wrong side leads to Katharine's lingering death in the cave. Almasy loses his beloved for the wrong assumption of being on the side of the Germans. Ironically, the characters who aspire to escape the boundaries demarcating a sense of belonging – to class, race and nationality – are victimized by these very boundaries. Like Almasy, Katharine aspires to escape the confines of her class, her aristocratic life style. She comes to the desert to experience a new life, and when she is dying in the cave after the plane crash, the last words she writes in the book Almasy leaves her, i.e. Herodotus, is "I know some day you will carry me out into the palace of winds. That's all I have wanted, to walk in such a place with you, with friends, *an earth without maps*" (min. 152) (emphasis added). This is the gist of the film's themes, that is, living in a community with no dividing lines between various groups of people, and regardless of one's origin.

Likewise, Hana is confronted with the English patient's objection, when she tells him that since "there is a war, where you come from becomes important." Almasy's answer is "Why? I hate that idea" (min.33). He is after a world in which the place one comes from is not important; the thing itself, or the man himself is important without adjectives like Arab, English, German or American attached to it. The setting, the monastery, which this small heterogeneous group, with different origins, come to stay in for a while, is a miniature of such an ideal world where people accept each other's differences on equal terms, and instead of dividing the world into fixed polarities, try to create a heterogeneous community. Creating such a community is the concern of the postcolonial era.

## HYBRIDITY

Bernard F. Dick refers to flashback as the foremost techniques shared between literature and film. The filmmaker may use this technique to give us information that is not available in any other way, or to provide an access to the past, or to explain the relation between the past and the present (1997, p.249). Dick believes that the best memory flashbacks need an object as a trigger. Minghella uses this technique to let his audience know about the subplot of the film which happens in the deserts of Cairo. In such sequences we see that British people like Madox, Bermann, and Katharine all admit their rejection of British imperial ideology based on 'Us' vs. 'Them' polarities. The choice of people with diverse nationalities for the expedition team makes their gathering a hybrid, heterogeneous one. One of the main issues discussed in this regard is the notion of 'hybridity' to which Edward Said refers in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). As he points out, "partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinary differentiated, and unmonolithic" (p.xxix). In this sense, hybridity refers to the situation in which the colonized and the colonizer's cultures interact with each other in a new third space. This hybridity also marks the art produced by the colonized people in such a situation. Moreover, the fact that these people wish for a world where man-made divisions and barriers would not separate human beings from their fellows with whatever origin, chimes in with Homi Bhabha's vision of postcolonial societies as a place where the colonizers and the colonized have a mutual relationship and construct each other's identity.

Bhabha, in "Commitment to Theory" (1994), defines 'hybridity' as what "is new, neither the one nor the other," but something else which is produced in a space which he calls the "Third Space of enunciation" (Bhabha, 1994, p.36). This is the space, which he regards as the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference (ibid., p.27). If as Bhabha says "all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation," then there is no claim to the *purity* of cultures (ibid., p.38). It is this *in-between* space that leads to the idea of an *international* culture based on the articulation of the hybridity, not the diversity, of cultures (ibid., p.39). While the notion of diversity separates cultures from each other, the notion of hybridity mingles them together, and this is against the will of the center.

In the postcolonial era 'crossing the borders' which separate men from each other, and the vision of a heterogeneous community is a main concern and theme which is reflected in the narratives and films of the period. Although imperialism reinforces "the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale", states Said, paradoxically

it makes people believe that they are only "either white or black, Westerner or Oriental" (Said, 1993, p.407). However, Said "appeals for a transcendence of national boundaries and separate traditions"(qtd. in Kennedy, 2000, p.89). Mingling of different people, and forming a new small hybrid world is imaged in a many a scene in the film. A good example is the scene in which Kip, Hardy (Kip's English sergeant), Cravaggio, and Hana make a stretcher for the English patient (the Hungarian Almsy), and taking the ends of it, running in the rain, carry him into the garden.

As Bhabha believes, in the postcolonial era we cannot expect a pure race and culture. A very clear and good example of the existence of hybridity in this film is the love stories woven into the plot of the film. The first romantic subplot, which happens in the desert and later in Cairo, is between Almsy, a Hungarian count, and Katharine, an aristocratic English woman. The two lovers are of different origins and nationalities (though they share an aristocratic background). However, a large part of the film revolves around their relations, how it started, and how and why it came to an end. The second romance revolves around the character of Hana, a Canadian nurse, and Kip, an Indian Sikh, in Italy a few years after the first plot. Again the two characters are from different origins, but they start to fall in love with each other, regardless of their national differences. That is, they accept each other the way they are, never looking down upon each other for their differences. The illustration of such hybrid relations in two different contexts and times, i.e. deserts of Africa at the beginning of World War II, and a monastery in Italy at the end of World War II, emphasizes the fact that the pure culture is just a myth.

Employing cinematic techniques and choosing creative camera angles allows Minghella to depict a brisker juxtaposition of the two settings of the story, i.e. African deserts and the Italian monastery, and provides the spectator with a more tangible exemplification of Bhabha's notion of a 'Third Space'. The first setting, the desert which is revived through the patient's memory flashbacks, is a space apart from centers of power, where different people have come together regardless of their nationalities. The second setting, the monastery in a village in Italy also stands for a third space where the Canadian Hana, the Hungarian Almsy, the Canadian/Italian Cravaggio, and the Indian Kip come to dwell, and to recover from their "war wounds," as the patient calls it.

This wish for an in-between space is conveyed in the way Hana looks at the vertical tower of the monastery in the distance for the first time. Minghella's use of this establishing shot conveys to the viewer how this building can be a new shelter for all the characters. It is almost at the beginning of the film that Hana hears the news of her fiancé's death in the war and later that of her close friend, Jane, in a mine explosion. As the film proceeds, Hana

tells the patient that she thinks she is cursed and she feels so depressed. It is at this moment that the tower of the monastery catches her eyes. Its vertical position imparts the sense of support and comfort that she and the patient, and later the other characters, find in staying in it, away from the centers of power and war.

## NATIONALITY OR TRANSNATIONALITY?

Like the novelists, the filmmakers use parallel cuts between two concurrent actions, and cut back and forth between them, to leave the audience in suspense (Dick, 2002, p.95). Both the novelists and the filmmakers gradually add to each episode until they come to a resolution, either separately or jointly. As discussed earlier, using parallel cuts, Minghella starts the film with the omniscient camera roving between two different plots: one concerned with the English patient in the deserts of Africa, and the other relating to Hana in a military hospital in Italy. As the film proceeds, the first plot unfolds through the patient's memory flashbacks to the past while the second plot between Hana and Kip develops in the present. What is shared between the two plots, or subplots, is the theme of a heterogeneous love, that is, the love affair between Almsy and Katharine in the desert lands of Africa, and the one between Kip and Hana in Italy. As the film comes to a close, we witness the way the love relations in both plots become unstable, and comes to an end due to the effects of the colonial wars and enmities raised by imperial powers before and after World War II. Whereas love and human sympathy bring people of different origins together, it is the impact of imperialism that alienates them from one another. That is, ultimately, these are the myths of race and nationality – the myths of borders - that draw a dividing line between people and separate them from one another. That is why Almsy pretends not to remember his name and nationality when he is interrogated at the wounded soldiers' camp in Italy. He is avoiding another disaster.

Minghella's concern with the issue of nationality is reflected in an early extreme close-up. Close-ups are means of emphasis to reveal a particular feeling or impart a particular mood in a film, but extreme close-ups, as Bernard Dick states, also contribute to the plot of the film (p.95). One of the most important extreme close-ups happens in the sequence in the Italian camp of soldiers where the camera focuses on the chart a man, who is interrogating the patient, is filling, writing "no" in front of the patient's name, rank, and serial number, but adding "English?" at the end of it (min. 9). This extreme close-up not only epitomizes the thematic of Ondaatje's novel which Minghella has adapted, but also functions as a flash forward to what the film is going to deal with: the other characters' bewilderment about and their quest for decoding the patient's true identity and name, and his own

escape from it almost to the end of the film before the revelation of his true identity to Cravaggio.

It is implied that what Almasy as a non-British wishes for is an ideal state which cannot be achieved while imperial powers, in classic or new forms of neocolonialism, still rule the world. The postcolonial ideal of a transnational community, where “destructive cultural encounter” has given its place to “an acceptance of difference on equal terms” (Ashcroft et al. 2002, p.35), cannot be easily realized in the ‘Third Space’ Bhabha theorizes, because colonial and imperial powers still rule the world. As Leela Gandhi states, although postcolonial critics try to emphasize the “mutual transculturation” of the colonizer/colonized relation, “The West remains the privileged meeting ground for all ostensibly cross-cultural conversations” (ibid., p.136), hence transnationality seems hardly viable.

The title of the novel and its cinematic adaptation, *The English Patient*, is highly interesting in this regard. Although Almasy, the protagonist, believes that “a thing is still a thing, no matter what you put in front of it” (min. 22), he is ironically known with one of these adjectives, “English”. It is these adjectives that draw the dividing lines between people and races, and let the imperial powers declare war on their opponents. On one occasion the expedition team get together in a bar to plan to go to the desert through Kufra. When Almasy expresses his disagreement with their plan, Madox replies, “You are Hungarian, you can’t disagree” (min. 36). On another occasion, when Almasy is at the British base to borrow a car and take a doctor to the cave in which Katharine is lying injured, the English officers ascribe a German nationality to him and arrest him. It is the adjective ‘German’ which causes him another loss, i.e. Katharine’s death. That is why the patient gets angry with Hana for saying that “*since there is a war*, it is important where one comes from”. Nationalities do not become important when wars happen; rather, wars start when distinct nationalities are assumed important. Therefore, since Almasy thinks that distinct identities and nationalities give rise to disastrous wars, he tries to escape from his own nationality.

Another important extreme close-up, which sharpens this theme occurs in the sequence recorded in the movie theatre, where Almasy and Katharine meet for the last time. A movie is being shown, and the camera focuses on the title of the movie on the silver screen: “Is it peace **Or War?**” (min. 101). Using the technique of voiceover, the filmmaker lets the audience know that this film is about the patriotic excitement and support the English people are showing their leader. The second half of the title “**Or War?**”, however, is written in bold making the question a rhetorical one. That is, although English people have gathered happily around their leader, Jerry, as a united nation, this patriotic excitement is not the sign of peace,

but rather a declaration of war upon another nation.

This sequence at the movie theatre functions as a flash forward too. In one of the successive scenes we see that Madox announces to Almasy that they should stop their expeditions in the desert and leave, since there is going to be a war, i.e. World War II. As we see, the film revolves around the theme of nationality, and the destructive aspects of being bound to it, in a world which essentially hybridity dominates. However, the vision of transculturality as an ideal solution to the destructive cultural encounters is presented as far from actuality - even the transnationality of the monastery community is established under the force of imperialism. For, as Spivak puts it, “those of us from formerly colonized countries are able to communicate with each other and with the metropolis, to exchange and to establish sociality and transnationality, because we have had access to the culture of imperialism” (qtd. in Brewster 1995, p.120). The term ‘transculturation’ refers to this mutual relation between the periphery and the metropolis or center. Mary Louise Pratt defines it as “a phenomenon of the contact zone”, where different cultures meet, clash, and finally construct each other’s identity through their relations (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 2000, p.233). Nevertheless, the idea of transculturality could challenge the idea of a monolithic Eurocentricism in this hybrid world, if, and only if, the West was not “the privileged meeting ground for all ostensibly cross-cultural conversations” (Gandhi, 1998, p.136). Kip, Hana, Cravaggio, and the patient are all where they are because of the ‘duty’ British imperialism has devolved upon them. Therefore, in a broader sense, their participation in a transnational community is a byproduct of imperial/colonial power relations. Hana stays in the monastery to look after her patient, because she is a military nurse. Kip comes to the monastery, since he is a sapper for the British army. Similarly Cravaggio, who later joins them in the monastery, is commanded by a British General to play the role of a spy. Even the patient who had drawn maps of deserts for years was not aware that the British government that supported their expedition club financially, needed their maps to *own* the North Africa as its colony.

This state of colonial dominance is very artistically visualized in a sequence in Tabruk when the German army is invading the city from the air and the land. In this scene the sky is filled with parachuting soldiers who come to land in Tabruk. The next scene shows three Arab women in their black robes and veils. Minghella first chooses a low-angle shot for them to imply that these Arabs are the original owners of this land. But he quickly turns the camera towards the top of a tall building behind these women to show the German soldiers walking on the roof. The change of camera angle to that of a second low-angle shot for the foreign soldiers lets us see how colonial expansionism changes the status of the Arab natives to

that of the colonized.

The film demonstrates that colonialism still operates in the world affairs directly or indirectly, and the end of the film visualizes this fact. Kip, the Indian whose country has experienced long years of colonization, and Hana, the Canadian nurse whose country has also been a French and British colony, in spite of their mutual love are forced to separate from each other, both in pursuit of the ‘duties’ the British government assigns them. Kip goes to the North of Florence as the head of a sapper unit, while Hana after the patient’s death joins the rest of the military nurses in another part of Italy to continue her serving the British army. The coercion of the brute reality of imperialism is illustrated in the shot from the road both Hana and Kip take as they are to leave the monastery. It is a road surrounded by long oak trees like bars, which nobody can pass through. The road seems the one and the only way out of this area, leaving no other choices.

---

## CONCLUSION

---

The advent of colonial and postcolonial studies in the late twentieth century, partly paved the way for and partly coincided with a flow of the works written or filmed in European languages that, as Andrew Smith asserts, “adopt[ed], adapt[ed], and often reject[ed] the established European models” (qtd. in Lazarus, 2004, p.244). It was almost in the same period that film was regarded as an art form which could be studied and analyzed in various ways.

Michael Ondaatje’s novel *The English Patient* addresses the main concern of this field, that is, the probing of the issues of postcoloniality: nationalism and transnationality, culture and transculturality – hybridity. Antony Minghella’s adaptation of the novel, however, uncannily foregrounds the central theme of crossing the borders through the masterly use of certain cinematic techniques. Minghella’s haunting presentation of the vision of “an earth without maps” crosses even the signifying borders of Ondaatje’s novelistic discourse.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2002). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Routledge.
- . (2000). *The Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. K. (Ed.). (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Brewster, Anne (1995). *Literary Formations: Post-colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism*. Australia: Melbourne University Press.
- Coulter, Gerry (2009). The Poetry of Reversibility and the Other in *The English Patient*. *Wide Screen*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://widescreenjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/viewArticle/15/14>.
- Coe, Jonathan (1997). From Hull to Hollywood: Anthony Minghella Talks about His Film, 'The English Patient,' and Denies that He is Turning to David Lean. *New Stateman*, 126, March 7. Retrieved from <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5000453243>.
- Dick, Bernard F. (2002). *Anatomy of Film* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martins.
- Fremlin, Jennifer A. (1997). The English Patient. *The Journal of African Travel-Writing*, (2), March, 86. Retrieved from [www.unc.edu/~ottotwo/englishpatient.html](http://www.unc.edu/~ottotwo/englishpatient.html)
- Ferrell, William K. (2000). *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers. Retrieved from <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=26289455>.
- Gandi, Leela (1998). *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Columbia University Press.
- Hsu, Hsunsun L. (1999). Post-Nationalism and the Adulteration of Vision in the English Patient. *Post-Identity*, 2(2), 73-103. Retrieved from <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/postid?cginame=textidx;id=newbarbrowselink;page=browse>
- Kennedy, Valerie. (2000). *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Lazarus, Neil, (Ed.). (2004). *The Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Leitch, Vincent B. (Ed.). (2001). *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton & Company.
- Minghella, Anthony (Dir.). (1996). *The English Patient*. Matrix.
- Said, Edward. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage.
- . (1995). *Orientalism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Penguin.