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## A STUDY ON MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *THE ENGLISH PATIENT* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH'S COSMOPOLITAN ETHICS

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### Abstract

The story of Philip Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* occurs during the North African Campaign and centers on the incremental revelations of the patient's actions prior to his injuries, and the emotional effects of these revelations on the other characters. This paper applies the theory of Kwame Anthony Appiah's cosmopolitan ethics to the study of *The English Patient* and through deeply analyzing three main characters--an English patient Almásy, a Canadian Army nurse Hana, and an Indian sapper Kip, to point out the dilemma of the cosmopolitanism and cultural identity that people face in the multi-cultural context and explores the depths of human emotion and the complexities of the human experience during a time of war.

**Keyword:** *The English Patient*; Kwame Anthony Appiah; rooted cosmopolitanism; moral disagreements; patriotism

### 1. Introduction

Philip Michael Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan-born Canadian poet, fiction writer, essayist, novelist, editor, and filmmaker, and his novel *The English Patient* (1992) was adapted into a film in 1996 and won the 2018 Golden Man Booker Prize. The world of the twentieth century was filled with terror for the destruction of war, the struggles for power, the exchange of money, and the desire for material goods had blinded people's eyes. The rapid development of globalization and the flow of population made Ondaatje perceive the spiritual crisis of human beings, so most of his novels focused on the survival of human beings in the era, especially *The English Patient*.

*The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje is an intricate tapestry of human experiences, woven with poetic language and vivid imagery that explores the complexities of love, loss, identity, and the effects of war. Set against the backdrop of World War II, the story takes place in Italy and Egypt, and each plot is focusing on a different character's past and present. This paper mainly study the three main characters: an unrecognizably burned patient Almásy who was presumed to be English, a Canadian Army nurse Hana, a Sikh British Army sapper Kip.

Ondaatje is generally regarded as an outstanding representative of postmodernism, but in addition to focusing on postmodern narrative skills (Liu 2009), most of the researches on *The*

*English Patient* mainly focus on the identity issues (Enescu 2012), historical memories (Adhikari 2002), trauma (Novak 2004), space construction (Zeng 2017), and handwriting (Shou-Nan 2018). Xie (2018) and Xu (2021) also did some research on one or more aspects of cosmopolitanism. On the basis of the previous studies, this paper intends to apply Appiah's cosmopolitan ethics to study the dilemma of the cosmopolitanism and cultural identity that people face in the multi-cultural context and explores the depths of human emotion and the complexities of the human experience during a time of war.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah began to put forward the concept of the "rooted cosmopolitanism" in *The Ethics of Identity* (2005) and proceeded to fully develop this concept in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006).

Appiah argues that identity is based on a set of choices offered by one's own culture and society. People need to protect the various cultures to which they belong, while also accepting that the individual has multiple memberships and different loyalties. It is also necessary to coexist with people within and outside the country who belong to different cultures, loyalties and multiple identities.

Appiah maintains that one should take seriously not only the value of human life in general, but also those in particular, which are created within people's own communities that give meanings to their lives. "Cosmopolitans think that there are many values worth living by and that you cannot live by all of them. So we hope and expect that different people and different societies will embody different values" (Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* 217).

However, Appiah also points out that universal concern for human values and respect for legitimate differences between people and culture sometimes conflict, and he proposes to resolve them through dialogue. "To engage in dialogue with others around the world about the questions great and small that we must solve together, about the many projects in which we can learn from each

other" (Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* 271). Through dialogue, different cultures can enhance understanding and tolerance, learn from each other, and peacefully coexist in the common world of mankind.

## 3. The Cosmopolitan Ethics in *The English Patient*

According to Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitan Ethics*, this paper analyzes three different cosmopolitans in this novel, namely, the rootless cosmopolitan Almásy, the lost cosmopolitan Hana, and the rooted cosmopolitan Kip, to deeply explore the living dilemma and the complicated emotion state of the people during the war time.

### 3.1 Almásy as a Rootless Cosmopolitan

Appiah's cosmopolitanism is rooted and allows for moral disagreements between different societies. He points out that, "If we are to encourage cosmopolitan engagement, moral conversation between people across societies, we must expect such disagreements: after all, they occur within societies" (Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* 67). Cosmopolitan ethics are strongly inclusive and allows for moral disagreements between different societies, but it also should have general and universal moral standards, especially for the attitudes of the justice.

László von Almásy was rootless and "nationless" (Ondaatje 147). As a Hungarian desert explorer, he stayed away from the noisy outside world and had a deep love for the desert, which he saw as a vast, impermanent place that was always changing and evolving. Moreover, he loved the desert because he regarded it as a "nationless (ibid)" place where the divisions of nationality were "insignificant.(ibid)" Like the desert, Almásy attempted to become "nationless (ibid)" by spending years in the Gifl Kebir looking for Zerkura, a mythical city thought to have existed in the Sahara.

There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I've met in my life. We were Germans, English, Hungarian, African--all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. (Ondaatje 147)

At the same time, Almásy was indifferent. After Hitler came to power, he invited Hungary to join the Axis powers and hoped to form a military alliance together. Subsequently, the Hungarian army followed Nazi Germany to the wars and looted along the way. According to Hitler's order, planned killings were carried out by the Hungarian army against ethnic groups such as the East Slavic, Jewish, Gypsies, Ukrainians, Georgians, Tatars, Azerbaijanis, and others who settled in Ukraine. The Hungary army committed numerous crimes under the leadership of Nazi Germany. However, as a Hungarian, Almásy neither cared about the life of the strangers, nor this war, only immersed in his own desert world.

Almásy was also quite selfish. He firstly had an affair with his colleague Geoffrey Clifton's wife Katharine, and then he traded the survey maps to the German soldiers in return for their helping him to get back to the cave to save Katharine. As an expert, Almásy knew everything about the desert, including all the dialects and water holes. When the Second World War was drawing to a close, and the united efforts of the whole world against the Nazi regime were about to see the light of day, he provided the Germans with his map in order to save his lover. What's more, he even led the German spies quickly across the desert to Cairo, creating a favorable situation for them.

Appiah's cosmopolitan ethic emphasizes the understanding and concern of the individual and puts more attention on humanitarianism, so saving Catherine's life is also moral. After all, "we can recognize and approve partialist sentiment in others; we can be horrified at its absence" (Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* 227). However, Almásy's unreserved supply of his valuable geographical information to the Germans may give them a head start in the war, which would not only delay the day of peace, but may even undo the efforts of so many people for years. Almásy's rootless nature predestined him to care little for the lives of the strangers, and he also had great moral disagreements with others. The existence of moral disagreements is reasonable, but it should also be based on certain general principles. After all, everyone has his own position, and if there is no

general principle to restrain such disagreements, the moral norms will lose its meaning.

### **3.2 Hana as a Lost Cosmopolitan**

Cosmopolitanism should be rooted, but it should not be confined to a particular nation. "One's national loyalties aren't determined solely by the geography of one's nativity" (Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* 242). However, it is worth noting that the prerequisite for a cosmopolitan to practice his love for strangers and responsibility for other nations is that his own survival and emotional needs are met.

Hana started out as a staunch cosmopolitan. As a Canadian health worker, she traveled to Italy at a young age to treat the wounded in different wartime hospitals. Although it did not fight directly in the early stage of World War II, Canada actively provided supplies and military assistance to its Allies, contributing greatly to the victory of the war. Canada also became a training base for Allied forces and one of the main allied rear bases in Europe, providing supplies, medical services, and other support. In addition, a large number of war refugees were taken in and asylum and support were provided by Canada. Although Hana had to face countless deaths and bloody mutilated bodies every day, she forced herself to be strong and contribute to the early end of World War II as her compatriots. At the same time, both her father and boyfriend went into battle for the sake of human well-being and "a sense of special responsibility toward nationals who are not conationals" (Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* 242).

However, the brutality of the war shook Hana's strong belief in cosmopolitanism. Unfortunately, both her father and boyfriend died on the front line. After the death of her boyfriend, Hana chose to abort her unborn child out of the consideration for the reality. Having lost her father, lover and child, Hana has lost her direction in life and motivation for her work. At that time, She was stationed at the Villa San Girolamo, a former nunnery and makeshift war hospital in Northern Italy, but she refused to leave the villa near the end of the war. The violence of the war and the trauma exacerbated by the death of her father and lover had taken the toll on her, so she was suffering from shell-

shock, or post-traumatic stress. She was fed up with all the pain the war brought her and decided to stay away from it. "Coming out of what had happened to her during the war, she drew her own rules to herself. She would not be ordered again or carry out duties for the greater good" (Ondaatje 15).

Hana lost the desire to live up to her cosmopolitan ideal. Because of her deep trauma, Hana paid all her attention to Almásy, the so called English patient, for whom she developed both romantic and familial love. She told Caravaggio that she loved Almásy, because "he is a saint", and "a despairing saint" (Ondaatje 47). Hana's special affection for Almásy was based on imaginary connections. For Hana, both of them were the victims of the brutal war, having lost their lovers or families. When Caravaggio continuously questioned the nationality and identity of Almásy and suspected him of being a German spy, she repeatedly stressed that "it doesn't matter who he is. The war's over" (Ondaatje 177). Overwhelmed with great grief, Hana was no longer concerned about whether Almásy had worked for the Germans or whether the war started by the Axis powers was just. All she wanted from Almásy was some security and courage to keep her going.

Cosmopolitanism begins with a concern for human nature and the responsibilities. However, there is no way to truly care about a stranger or even an unrelated nation when one cannot obtain a continuous stream of emotional support and a stable living condition. Even if Hana was a determined cosmopolitan at the beginning, she finally returned to herself after her emotional roots were destroyed.

### 3.3 Kip as a Rooted Cosmopolitan

Appiah believes that cosmopolitanism is rooted and patriotic, just as he points out in his *Cosmopolitan Patriots*:

The cosmopolitan patriot can entertain the possibility of a world in which everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of one's own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the

presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people. (618)

Therefore, cosmopolitanism and patriotism do not oppose each other; on the contrary, cosmopolitanism is based on the strong confidence and dependence of one's own national culture and morality.

Kip was initially fascinated by Britain and its culture and wanted to become a civilized person like the British. He was a Sikh from Punjab, and then he joined an experimental bomb unit led by an English Lord Suffolk who also taught him Western songs and customs during World War II. Kip immersed himself in Western culture and practices, and even developed a deep love for English tea, but he was never accepted as an equal in the eyes of the Westerners and was received as an "other" because of his brown skin and turban. Because he believed in a "civilized world" (Ondaatje 129), he remained loyal to the job the British offered him, for "he never speaks about the danger that comes with his kind of searching" (Ondaatje 78), even though he knew he could lose his life when he was clearing the mines at any moment.

At the same time, Kip was patriotic. He stuck to Indian habits, like wearing a turban. One day Kip was disappointed to find that the civilization he had been longing for was so cruel and barbaric. The news that the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki caused Kip to wake up and realize that what the white people did was a hoax from the beginning to the end. The world of equality and peace that white people sought did not include the colored people, and they even use cruel means to achieve certain ends when necessary. Kip and many of his compatriots were just the tools of the whites to achieve their purposes. Kip could not accept such cruel destruction of ordinary human beings. Therefore, he went to Almásy with a lot of anger and said, "With your missionary rules. And Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be pukkah. You had wars like cricket. How did you fool us into like this" (Ondaatje 301). Then he threw away all military objects, all bombs disposal equipment, stripped all insignia off his uniform and came back to India.

Kip used to be an ardent cosmopolitan and followed Britain in order to make his contributions to the world during the Second World War, but at last he realized that a true cosmopolitan has his own roots, and he should love his motherland first rather than Britain. Kip's anger stemmed not only from his sympathy for the ordinary people who died under the atomic bomb, but also from his love for his own country. He feared that one day his country and people would quietly become the victims of the white people out of their interests, and he would become an accomplice, "Yet cosmopolitanism unmodified—taken as a sort of rigorous abjuration of partiality, the discarding of all local loyalties—is a hard sell. It is a position that has little grip upon our hearts" (Appiah, *Ethics of Identity* 221). Therefore, he chose to leave this cruel group and return to his own people and culture.

#### 4. Conclusion

With the analysis of the three characters, namely, Almásy, Kip, and Hana of Philip Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* from the perspective of Kwame Anthony Appiah's cosmopolitan ethics, this paper explores the depths of human emotions and the complexities and dilemma of the cosmopolitanism during a time of war. In the context of the war, no one can be immune, and many of the people have lost their faith, families, health and even life under the weight of the torrent of the times. Rootless cosmopolitans lack care and responsibility for strangers and tend to ignore the overall situation when faced with moral choices. With a strong spiritual support from their loved ones, people are likely to have a firm belief in cosmopolitanism, otherwise they will be like Hana, who lost the direction of life in the pain of the deaths of her father and lover. In addition, rooted in their own culture and identity, the cosmopolitans are able to obtain a steady flow of spiritual strength and the clear direction for life.

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