Displacement and National Identities in *The English Patient*

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Abstract

Michael Ondaatje’s novel and Anthony Minghella’s subsequent screen adaptation of *The English Patient* may be, at first glance, considered a classic romance with a dramatic finale. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes evident that both the novel and the film adaptation are extremely preoccupied with questions about (voluntary) displacement and national identities during a period of crisis. Using World War II as a backdrop, the story questions the importance of one’s nationality and how what is considered one’s country is not necessarily connected with one’s feelings of national identity. It is this chosen displacement, which distinguishes these characters from all the heroes in literature and films who are forced to leave their countries because of the outbreak of wars or disease, which makes this story particularly interesting. To this end, this paper seeks to investigate the relations between the main characters of both novel and film and to highlight the crucially different approaches, especially in the story’s conclusion, which the two mediums adopt in relation to their subject matter with the hopes of understanding the motivations guiding these fictional characters.

*Keywords*: Michael Ondaatje, Anthony Minghella, identity, nationality, displacement.

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Michael Ondaatje’s novel and Anthony Minghella’s subsequent screen adaptation of *The English Patient* may be, at first glance, considered a classic romance with a dramatic finale. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes evident that both the novel and the film adaptation are extremely preoccupied with questions about (voluntary) displacement and national identities during a period of crisis. As Cengiz Karagöz points out specifically in regards to Ondaatje, “[he] wants to underline the impossibility of associating people with certain national and cultural identities as they bear out their [existence] not within the bounds of peculiar norms but within a vacuum in which these bounds are merged with each other” (41). Using World War II as a backdrop, the story questions the importance of nationality, acknowledging that what is considered one’s country is not necessarily connected with one’s feelings of national identity. The characters are representatives of the educated elite who find themselves at odds with their respective national identities and seek to find a new world, where narrow-minded national perceptions bound to the traditional concept of “homeland,” cease to exist. It is this chosen displacement, as we shall see in the character studies below, which distinguishes these individuals from all the heroes in literature and films who are forced to leave their countries because of the outbreak of wars or disease that makes this story particularly interesting.

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Ultimately, the North African desert – a symbol of the beginning of civilization – and the Italian villa – a symbol of the heights of western culture – are turned into stages where nations collide. To this end, I investigate the relations between the main characters of both novel and film and highlight the crucially different approaches, especially in their conclusions, that the two mediums adopt towards their subject matter, hoping to understand the characters’ motives.

In his essay “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said provides the following definition of the terms “exile,” “refugee,” “expatriate” and “émigré”:

Exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider. Refugees, on the other hand, are a creation of the twentieth-century state. The word “refugee” has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas “exile” carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality.

Expatriates voluntarily live in an alien country, usually for personal or social reasons… Émigrés enjoy an ambiguous status. Technically, an émigré is anyone who emigrates to a new country. Choice in the matter is certainly a possibility. (181)

Taking these definitions, and applying them to the main characters of The English Patient, is not an easy task. We can start, however, by eliminating the one term that does not apply to any of the main characters. Count Almásy/the English patient, Hana, Caravaggio, Kip, and Katharine are not refugees.

Let us, then, examine each character separately, to determine how they fit within Said’s definitions. The least problematic character is Katharine. In Ondaatje’s novel she is allotted the least amount of storytelling, thus emerging as a ghost-like figure who only lives in the narrator’s memories. Also, considering that every piece of information we receive about her comes through the terribly unreliable narration of the English patient, we can only be certain of a few things about her: she is English, she is married to an English explorer who in truth is a British spy, she has an extramarital affair with Almásy, and she dies in the desert sometime before WWII starts. This Katharine never directly addresses the reader, therefore we are not privy to any of her thoughts regarding her displacement. Minghella’s Katharine at least offers one thought on how she feels about being in Egypt:

Katharine: This is a different world, is what I tell myself. Different life. And here I’m a different wife.

Almásy: Yes. Here you are a different wife. (1:12:50-1:29:22)
In the film, Katharine acknowledges a change in her status, because she finds herself in a “different world.” However, did she choose this displacement? Certainly, neither in the novel nor in the film is Katharine an exile. The question then is whether she is an expat or an émigré? Considering that she has no choice in the matter, because in both mediums she simply follows husband in his assignment, I would place her under the definition of the expatriate. She certainly lives a solitary life in her new environment. Additionally, by having Katharine write her obituary in the cave of swimmers in the end – a piece of monologue that in the novel is ascribed almost word for word to Almásy – we gain a new perspective into her mindset at the end of this life’s adventure:

Katharine: We die…
Hana: We die… We die rich with lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have entered and swum up like rivers.
Katharine: Fears we’ve hidden in – like this wretched cave. I want all this marked on my body. We’re the real countries. Not the boundaries drawn on maps with the names of powerful men. I know you’ll come and carry me out into the Palace of Winds. That’s what I’ve wanted: to walk in such a place with you. With friends, an earth without maps. (2:31:58-2:33:14)\(^4\)

At the end of her life, then, it seems that Katharine internalizes the deepest desires that drive Almásy away from his homeland, as will become clear later on.

The Canadian nurse, Hana, responsible for taking care of the English patient, is a complicated character, at least in the novel, since the film gives no reasons as to why she is in Italy. The audience gets morsels of information about her. The information that is most pertinent in this context is that she is from Montreal: “Apparently we’re neighbors. My house is two blocks from yours in Montreal. Cabot north of Laurier” (30:57-31:05).\(^5\) In addition, she is clearly attached to her Canadian identity, as can be discerned from the following exchange:

Hana: There is a man downstairs. […] He’s Canadian.
Almásy: Why are people always so happy when they collide with someone from the same place? What happened in Montreal when you passed a man in the street? Did you invite him to live with you?
Hana: He needn’t disturb you.
Almásy: He can’t. I’m already disturbed.
Hana: There’s a war. Where you come from becomes important.
Almásy: Why? I hate that idea. (32:49-33:29)\(^6\)

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\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Ibid.
Movie Hana acknowledges clearly that their current wartime situation creates deep connections among complete strangers who share a national identity. By contrast, Ondaatje’s Hana is a much more complex character, who does not simply exist as a love interest in a secondary story. She is, in truth, the only female character in the novel that has a backstory. She clearly rejects the notion of placement as can be inferred from her choice of habitation at the Villa: “There were few beds left. She herself preferred to be nomadic in the house with her pallet or hammock, sleeping sometimes in the English patient’s room, sometimes in the hall, depending on temperature or wind or light […]” (13).7 “[s]he was living like a vagrant, while elsewhere the English patient reposed in his bed like a king” (14).8 Deciding to sleep in a different room every night, is, it would seem, her way of ensuring that she remains “displaced”, even in the villa she inhabits temporarily. At the same time, the constant threat of being confronted with the loss of people she knows from Canada makes her dismissive of her own national identity as a means of emotional defense: “She never looked at herself in mirrors again. […] 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. […] Where was and what was Toronto anymore in her mind?” (50).9 All these notions are lost in Minghella’s adaptation of Hana’s character. The two Hanas, then, are portrayed differently when it comes to national identities and displacement. While, by Said’s definition, Ondaatje’s Hana is essentially an expatriate because she leaves Canada to escape a problematic family situation, Minghella’s Hana is an émigré who chooses to go to war as a civil servant. Ondaatje’s Hana eventually returns to Canada, but her future remains open at the end of the film.

The next character that this essay explores, David Caravaggio, is, amongst the male protagonists, the only character that does not undergo significant changes in the adaptation. In both mediums, we gain very little insight into the notions of national identity that the character may have. In the film, only during the interrogation scene do we gain a glimpse of Caravaggio’s possible origins: “You are a Canadian spy working for the Allies. Codename Moose. […] You were brought up in Libya, yes? […] Or was it Toronto?” (1:37:11-1:38:44).10 Minghella leaves out any details pertaining to Caravaggio’s thoughts on identity, because they serve little to move the action forward. They simultaneously reinforce the fluidity of Caravaggio’s persona, since he is indeed a spy. In the novel, on the contrary, Caravaggio’s main function is to question the identity of the English patient: “I know you love the man, but he’s not an Englishman. […] Between the wars Almásy had English friends. Great explorers. But when war broke out he went with the Germans. Rommel asked him to take Eppler across the desert into Cairo because it would have been too obvious by plane or parachute” (164).11 The novel can easily add depth to its heroes because it is not bound by time constraints, hence, enough information is provided to

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
understand what drives Caravaggio, especially in terms of displacement. As a thief in Toronto, he moves all over the city, breaking and entering – in essence, breaking private boundaries. He continues on this path, when he is recruited to work as a spy during the war. However, at the villa, where he temporarily must remain still, he assumes the role of the detective, trying to uncover the truth behind the English patient’s true identity. His transgressions then become mental and not physical ones. What connects both Caravaggios is their fluidity as they stand between worlds, usually in the shadows, questioning others, not themselves. One may claim that Caravaggio is, subconsciously, on a journey of claiming a universal identity, instead of one fixed national identity. As such, I would call him a man in self-exile, because his journey, according to Said’s terminology, is both solitary and spiritual albeit by choice.

Choice is also the reason why Kirpal Singh, or Kip, finds himself in England and then Italy. Minghella’s sapper is a watered-down version of Ondaatje’s hero, once again as a result of practical reasons regarding a feature film’s duration. There are only two scenes in the movie that help us understand Kip’s position within the community of the villa. The first of these scenes is a very brief dialogue between Hana and Almásy:

Hana: He’s Indian. He wears a turban.
Almásy: No, he is Sikh. If he wears a turban, he is Sikh (46:44-46:54).12

Almásy, correcting Hana as to how to identify Kip’s ethnic identity correctly, signals how ill-informed the nurse is regarding different traditions in a country that is thousands of miles away and unfamiliar to her before she meets Kip. The second scene highlights some of the disdain Kip feels towards the English overlords, when he is seen reading Kipling to Almásy:

Kip: I can’t read these words. They stick in my throat.
Almásy: Because you are reading them too fast.
Kip: Not at all.
Almásy: You have to read Kipling slowly. Your eye is too impatient. Think about the speed of his pen. What is it? “He sat, in defiance of municipal orders, astride the gun Zanzimar on her brick…” what is it?
Kip: “Brick platform opposite the old Ajib Care…”
Almásy: “the Wonder House, as the natives called the Lahore museum.”
Kip: It’s still there, the canon, outside the museum. It was made of metal cups and bowls taken from every household in the city as tax, then melted down. And later they fired the canon at my people, the natives, full stop.
Almásy: What exactly is it you object to? The writer or what he is writing about? (1:07:55 – 1:08:59)13

13 Ibid.
Kip deftly refuses to continue the conversation by drawing attention to an entirely different matter. However, it is clear from this exchange that Kip identifies with the natives of his occupied homeland. Yet, at the same time, in the film at least, Kip tries to find some positive traits about the English: “I was thinking yesterday, yesterday; the patient and Hardy, they’re everything that’s good about England” (2:24:31-2:24:43). By the end of the film, Kip seems to have reconciled himself with everything that has happened to him and parts ways with Hana and Caravaggio in an amicable fashion. This Kip is an émigré whose development reflects the idealized narrative that Western culture favors when encountering stories - real or fictional - that engage with the traumata caused by the colonization of the East.

It should come as no surprise here that Ondaatje’s Kip is nothing like that. Next to the English patient, Kip receives the most attention in the novel. The author shows his deep interest not just by providing the reader with plenty of information about the character himself, but also about his occupation as a sapper. It is telling, how easily manipulated for a very long time this version of Kip has been and the first instance, is the loss of his name:

The sapper’s nickname is Kip. “Get Kip.” “Here comes Kip.” The name had attached itself to him curiously. In his first bomb disposal report in England some butter had marked his paper, and the officer had exclaimed, “What’s this? Kipper grease?” and laughter surrounded him. He had no idea what a kipper was, but the young Sikh had been thereby translated into a salty English fish. Within a week his real name, Kirpal Singh, had been forgotten. He hadn’t minded this. (87)

Ondaatje’s Kip at first, craves acceptance among the English. He comes across as a pushover. He is the perfect subject, yet constantly an outsider, looking in: “But he was a professional. And he remained the foreigner, the Sikh” (105), or “[t]he 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 the invisible world” (196). The description of him being unable to sleep in a real bed is also particularly interesting:

Most of his childhood in Lahore he slept on a mat on the floor of his bedroom. And in truth he has never gotten accustomed to the beds of the West. A pallet and an air pillow are all he uses in his tent, whereas in England when staying with Lord Suffolk he sank claustrophobically into the dough of a mattress, and lay there captive and awake until he crawled out to sleep on the carpet. (280)

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14 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
As much as he wants to be assimilated into his new identity in England, he fails to do so, which clearly causes him to feel ashamed. Ondaatje also does not shy away from presenting Kip as having a naïve understanding of the world, by contrasting him with his brother, who has a much better understanding of the colonial powers occupying the Punjab: “Although he is a man from Asia who has in these last years of war assumed English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son. “Ah, but my brother thinks me a fool for trusting the English.” […] “One day, he says, I will open my eyes. Asia is still not a free continent, and he is appalled at how we throw ourselves into English wars”” (217).19 The coup de grace, however, comes at the end. Unlike Minghella’s adaptation, Ondaatje includes the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in his novel, which is the breaking point, or rather, the moment that Kip finally understands his position in the world and thus reaches a mental state of political adulthood:

My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them. But we, oh, we were easily impressed – by speeches and medals and your ceremonies. What have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For this to happen? (284-85; emphasis in original)20

Ondaatje’s Kip undergoes a different journey of discovering his identity. He starts as an émigré, who joins the war effort because he is blinded by promises of freedom by the British Empire, and his wish to discard the Sikh identity and be assimilated by the culture of his overlords. However, by the end of the war he comes to understand that his original identity is what places him on the outside of the Western traditions. No matter how successful he is as a sapper serving the British Empire, he is still an outsider, an exile from the world he would like to inhabit, but is unable to do so. With that understanding, comes his acceptance of his original identity and thus, at the end of the war, he finds his way back to the Punjab, returning to his true roots.

Finally, the title character, not surprisingly, is the most difficult to pin down. Ondaatje’s patient is not necessarily the same as Minghella’s as Jacqui Sadashige observes:

[Int] adapting The English Patient to film, screenwriter and director Anthony Minghella has effected changes […]. In simple formal terms, Minghella provides his film with a narrative focus; Count Almásy […] becomes the central character, and his story – in particular the retelling of his affair with Katharine Clifton – organizes the film’s structure. The way in which this structural shift affects the film’s meaning can be seen by examining two mutually reinforcing strategies: the radical change in dramatic climax and

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
the introduction of closure to the patient’s life along with the fixing of his identity. (247)\textsuperscript{21}

What is meant here is that, because the two mediums operate in a different way, maintaining the structure of the novel in the film would have resulted in an incomprehensible story. Let us then see what we can discover about Minghella’s hero. The first important scene, introducing us to him comes at a beach hospital in Italy. Note that the conversation and imagery drop very obvious hints about the fact that the individual being questioned is definitely not English:

Interrogator: Name? Rank? Serial number?
Almásy: No, sorry. I think I was a pilot. I was found in the wreckage of a plane at the beginning of the war. [The interrogator notes in his notebook: […] “male – unknown age 35/40 approx. no tag/no uniform serious burns ENGLISH?”].
Interrogator: Can you remember where you were born?
Almásy: Am I being interrogated? You should be trying to trick me. Make me speak German. Which I can, by the way.
Interrogator: Why? Are you German?
Almásy: No.
Interrogator: How do you know you’re not German, if you don’t remember anything? […]
Almásy: I remember lots of things. (09:13-10:03)\textsuperscript{22}

The patient here shows a clear disregard for nationalities – then again, he is dying. The element that gives him away as not being truthful, is his immediate deflection when caught lying about his knowledge of the German language, but clearly remembering not being German. This man remembers his life. However, given his circumstances and the knowledge that he will soon be gone, he decides to keep that information to himself. Being burnt beyond recognition and with no other identifying markers, he can become invisible. We learn little more about Almásy in the flashback scenes. There is one rather humorous exchange that indicates a certain stubborn mentality that derives from his nationality:

Almásy: I disagree.
Madox: You’re Hungarian. You always disagree. (36:22-36:25)\textsuperscript{23}

Of course, there is the dramatic scene at El Taj, where the suspicious British officer fails to recognize Almásy’s name, thus causing his capture and Katharine’s death: “Almásy? Do you

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
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mind spelling that for me? […] What nationality would that be?” (2:17:37-2:17:45).\(^{24}\) In addition, in his nightly confession to Caravaggio this Almásy finally admits that his life’s journey had been marked by wrongful identities: “So yes, she died because of me. Because I loved her. Because I… Because I had the wrong name” (2:21:53-2:22:15).\(^{25}\) He also acknowledges the irony in his being labelled “English,” post-plane crash: “So, I got back to the desert and to Katharine, in Madox’s English plane with German gasoline. When I arrived in Italy on my medical chart they wrote ‘English patient’. Isn’t that funny? After all that, I became English” (2:23:01-2:23:33).\(^{26}\)

Minghella’s Almásy, while most of the time maintaining a very composed character, expresses some of his more scathing criticism against nations when in a heightened emotional state. The most important instance takes place at the last dinner of the “International Sand Club”:

The International Sand Club! Misfits, buggers, fascists and fools! God bless us everyone! Oops! Mustn’t say “international”, dirty word, filthy word! His Majesty! Der Führer! Il Duce! […] And the people here don’t want us. You must be joking. The Egyptians are desperate to get rid of the colonials, isn’t that right, Fouad? Some of their best people getting down on their hands and knees begging to be spared the knighthood. (1:45:16-1:45:46)\(^{27}\)

This Almásy seems suddenly awakened from a stupor, realizing that the world he is trying to understand through map-making is the playground for powerful nations to mess with. Towards the end of the film, we have one last scathing piece of criticism, not directly spoken by Almásy, but by his best friend, Madox, with whom, however, he agrees:

Madox: We didn’t care about countries, did we? Brits, Arabs, Hungarians, Germans, none of that mattered, did it? It was something finer than that!

Almásy: Yes, it was. […]

Madox: Come and visit us in Dorset when all this nonsense is over. You’ll never come to Dorset. (2:06:08-2:07:35)\(^{28}\)

This last remark about Almásy never going to Dorset brings us to a second problem, that is, Almásy’s voluntary displacement before the plane crash. Katharine, during a car ride, asks Almásy: “I’ve been thinking, how does someone like you, decide to come to the desert? What is it? You… you’re doing whatever you’re doing in your castle or wherever it is you live and one day you say ‘I have to get to the desert’ or what?” (48:30-48:44).\(^{29}\) The answer she receives could not be vaguer: “I once travelled with a guide who was taking me to Faya. He didn’t speak

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
\(^{25}\) Ibid.
\(^{26}\) Ibid.
\(^{27}\) Ibid.
\(^{28}\) Ibid.
\(^{29}\) Ibid.
for nine hours. At the end of it he pointed at the horizon and said, ‘Faya’. That was a good day” (48:45-49:03). This Almásy expresses that he is in search of the elusive horizon; the one thing everyone can see, but never grasp. This search has taken him to the desert, away from everything familiar and cultured. The lack of conversation with his guide, and the fact that he describes this as a “good day” indicate a desire to shed civilization’s first building block, language, off him. He chooses to cut off his roots, in order to live a rootless life in the air (as a pilot) and in the desert, where borders and thus ownership, are impossible to demarcate as Behnaz Niroumand and Hossein Pirnajmuddin observe:

[T]he ownership that Almasy [sic] 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. Almasy [sic] tries to escape the nets of such ownership. (138)

The novel, on the other hand, handles the English patient in a different way. First and foremost, the reader is only partially certain that the patient and Almásy are one and the same, as confirmed by Pradeep Kaur and Jap Preet Kaur Bhangu: “Ondaatje’s focus is on the uncertainty of the patient’s identity, his Englishness coupled with his non-white appearance and his exotic encounters in the desert contribute to a sense of dislocation and a questioning of the traditional concepts of nation, identity, and race. The mysterious identity of the patient raises the issues of questioning the national identity” (13). The question of national identity in the novel is essentially summed up in a comment made by the English patient, regarding both his and Kip’s nationalities: “Kip and I are both international bastards – born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives” (176). Note that he does not discuss purity of blood or race. He is a bastard purely because he tries to escape something, which at this point he cannot explain. However, he has given an explanation as to his loathing of national identities in a previous monologue:

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30 Ibid.
There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I’ve met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, African – all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. […]

The desert could not be claimed or owned. […] All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. […] We disappeared into landscape. (138-39)

In this passage, it is clear that the experience of the vastness of the desert leads the English patient to realize that the political construct of nations pales in comparison to the desert, as Gerry Coulter points out: “There are no borders in the desert as there are none in the sky” (2). As such, Ondaatje’s patient, whether he can be identified as Almásy or not, cannot be labelled using Said’s definitions, because the definition lacks one notion: the individual who desires to be nationless in order to achieve a universal identity. Tellingly, this desire is what Ondaatje’s mysterious hero exclaims:

We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography – to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps. (261)

Ondaatje admits that the historical Almásy was an inspiration for his novel, yet at the same time he does not identify his patient with that figure as Vernon Provencal points out: “[It] was never the historical Almásy Ondaatje was in search of per se, but only the historical counterpart of his vision. Characteristic of Ondaatje’s work is a certain ‘playful’ engagement with the historical that was operative when he researched his vision” (145). Historical evidence on Almásy is scarce, but we know that the novel fictionalizes almost every aspect of his life. Does this change how we read the fictional character and his ideas regarding nationality and displacement? I believe not.

34 Ibid.
Two last comments need to be included. The first, regarding the setting of the Italian villa is by Lilijana Burcar:

Significantly, the end of WWII finds the tableau of the text’s four focal characters [Almásy, Hana, Caravaggio, Kip] clustered together in a ruined, Renaissance villa in the north of Italy, the cradle of Humanism, which, among other things, also set in motion the inauguration of nationalist discourses and nation-states. As the ruined villa symbolically epitomizes the house of the imperialist nation lying in ruins, the tableau of the four characters, with their memories and scars left in the wake of the destruction of WWII, problematizes the political reality and conceptual postulation of nation by exposing it as a transitional (fluctuating) social reality and as a form of conceptual violence in the service of expansionist schemas of Western, imperial powers. (101)38

It is important to remember that both the novel and its film adaptation play between two extremes. The desert setting and the Italian villa (albeit in a desolate state), are two sides of the same coin. Both settings beget civilization. The only difference is, the desert makes those civilizations invisible, whereas the villa makes them permanent.

The second and final observation is by Jacqui Sadashige who eloquently sum ups the take-away from both novel and film:

The love affair between Almásy and Katharine Clifton is adulterous; that between Kip and the Canadian nurse Hana is interracial; both are transnational. And for a moment, their erotic entanglements appear to offer these characters a means for defying the structures of nation, race, or social relations by which they find themselves inscribed, or at least for imagining that possibility. (245)39

As mentioned above, the ending in each version of the story is decidedly different. However, even though the novel includes the violent explosions of two atomic bombs, both mediums provide a reconciliation of sorts. For, as Katharine puts it in the film: “We’re the real countries. Not the boundaries drawn on maps with the names of powerful men” (2:32:31-2:32:40).40

One of the taglines used for the promotion of the film was “In love, there are no boundaries.” After reading Ondaatje’s novel and watching Minghella’s adaptation on the silver screen, one can appreciate this more deeply. National identities appear to be fluid and open to interpretation, and the common ground that connects the characters of both iterations is their deep sense of

displacement. It is in this state of uncertainty and through the act of love and forgiveness that they find, first, their own true selves, and then by extension, that of the other.

Works Cited


