



Identity between Assimilation and Self-Discovery: A Study of Michael

Ondaatje *The English Patient* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Abstract

This research deals with Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) as a journey to self-discovery and to prove the identity after the characters' failure of understanding their assimilation in Europe. The study is investigated by comparing the depiction of identity between assimilation and self-discovery in the two novels from the postmodernist and modernist perspectives respectively. The research starts with introduction, and then the methodology occurs. The discussion follows the method of analysis that is previously determined; it discusses how the identity interweaves between the assimilation and self-discovery. The paper ends with the conclusion which sums up the finding of the research.

Key Words: Identity, other, assimilation, self-discovery.

Introduction

People have always used the terms 'identity' and 'self' interchangeably. However, in literature, it is important to note that the two terms may seem or appear indistinguishable but very different in the sense that they bear distinct meanings. Identity is used to refer to the human experiences of superficial characteristics; for example, race, gender or nationality, and how these factors shape the way the society think and relate. On the other hand, self is basically the representation of one's essential being that is formed despite the influence in the surrounding. In other words, it is concerned with the way the human mind functions. Michael Ondaatje's writing was influenced by the life experiences he went through. In 1962, he migrated from his home



Ceylon, Sri Lanka to Canada via England. Along the way to Canada he met different people; thus, his style of using diverse characters such as the nurse from Canada, Almasy from an English background, and Kirpal from an Indian background. Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, was also influenced by the life experiences. Everyone she loved died and she was left alone. Virginia worked as a volunteer that later incapacitated her life due to intense headaches and emotional illnesses. She spent most of her life in care homes; this kind of loneliness is what influenced her writings.

The methodology

The methodology used in this study involved a qualitative approach. I engaged in a critical analysis of the self-identity issue as presented in the two novels “The English Patient” and “Mrs. Dalloway”. The critical analysis was achieved by engaging other discussions through the selected materials. The materials used were obtained from the “Google Scholar” website where I searched for the headwords such as “Analysis, Mrs. Dalloway, The English Patient, and Self-Identity.” The selected materials were peer reviewed; thus, it helped to achieve the credibility of the discussion.

Discussion

Identity is one of the two main themes in the novel “The English Patient;” the other is displacement. As a postmodernist novelist, Michael Ondaatje explores the suffering and struggles about identity experienced by both the colonized and colonizers after colonization period. The identity of main characters in this novel is related to the social issues. As Furuholm, Malin explains in “Belonging in Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient,” the novel tries to



explore the conflict in the relationship between the 'self' and the 'other' which are considered to be the salient issues. Every member of the society would like to feel the sense of belonging (Burcar 107). However, the sense of belonging cannot be achieved without first realizing one's identity since the two concepts are closely related. Achieving the sense of belonging may not be easy because a nation carries people from different ethnic and racial groups. The world at large contains nations with different people. However, the social classes influence the means to achieve the sense of belonging. People think that they belong to a single and collective entity called community or nation; however, this is just but an idea (Cook 36).

Virginia Woolf on the other hand as a modernist writer present the concept of 'self' as an aggregate of different parts. This has been wrongly interpreted by many as singular. She achieves this through the motif of integrating different parts together. The quest for identity in her novel "Mrs. Dalloway" is depicted through the protagonist, Mrs Dalloway. Woolf writes that "she (Mrs. Dalloway) has the oldest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown (Woolf 14). Her loneliness which can be seen with the kinds of situations she finds herself can further explain her search for identity. Clarissa's loneliness that translates to sexual repression and reserve that makes her conform to the social norms and values shows that there is something that she lacks as an individual. For example, she marries Richard without realizing her affections for Sally (Hawthorn 2). Clarissa is married to Richard; however, we can note the kind of confusion she is emotionally with other people like Sally and Peter. Although she married to Richard, she cannot hide her feelings towards Peter whom she is attracted to. At the same time, she is still emotionally attached to her childhood friend, Sally. This kind of confusion makes her life in a compromised situation where she has to find her real identity and where she belongs instead of following things based on the way they unfold. Being a Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa is associated



with a number of opportunities and privileges that come with the sociable role (DeMeester 651). However, Peter, the other guy that she admires cannot interpret her actions including the meaning of the parties she organizes often. All that Peter understands is that the parties Mrs Dalloway organizes bring people together; however, he still regards her with the great importance. Woolf writes that “for there she was” (Woolf 172) to demonstrate Peter’s acknowledgement of Mrs Dalloway’s importance in the novel that has been expressed metaphorically.

Woolf manages to depict the loss of identity and self through the character, Clarissa. However, she tries to find the identity and self through the social events like parties that she organizes. As DeMeester, Karen explains in "Trauma and Recovery in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway," Woolf uses streams of consciousness that submerge her audiences into emotional conflicts and struggles of her main characters such as Lucrezia and Septimus, Peter Walsh and Clarissa Dalloway. Through the use of such streams of consciousness, Woolf manages to bring her readers to the characters’ identity. By this I mean, the protagonist, Clarissa’s dignity and serenity towards other characters. Woolf integrates the common experiences of different characters in the novel through the streams of consciousness. For example, Peter’s haughty unconcerned attitude towards Clarissa is just but resentment depicting his undying love for Clarissa Dalloway. This is the unity that Woolf creates through the integration of fragmented selves of different characters.

Woolf has presented the issue of sexuality as an intrinsic and fundamental part of one’s identity (DeMeester 667). She achieves this by subverting the concept of male rationality and female hysteria. Woolf has presented characters whose traits are associated with opposite sex.



For example, Septimus and Clarissa depict traits that are associated with the opposite sex. Woolf writes that “Clarissa feels what men felt (Woolf 32)” towards Sally. On the other hand, “Septimus and Evans had to be together.....sharing together (Woolf 86). Woolf present characters who are in deep struggle and conflict with the ‘self’ which is the consciousness in an attempt to identify their real identity. For instance, Septimus is in conflict with his consciousness when he desires to join the war. He wants to prove himself as a man by fighting in the bloody war (Woolf 69).

Woolf’s portrayal of grief is another instance of identity discovery. Woolf describes male characters in the novel with feminine traits. Martin Esslin, a theater of absurdist explained that the authors create an environment where characters are isolated and confused because they do not know what to do. Again, in the theater of absurd, man is not situated in historical, social, or cultural perspectives. Men are known to be assertive, masculine and rational. However as Hjersing, Charlotte explains, Woolf proves otherwise of this statement by portraying men who are overtly emotional. For example, Peter who bursts into tears and Septimus who had fought in bloody war crying are some of the male characters that have been described with feminine features. Through interchanging the gender roles (Hawthorn 13), Woolf manages to create different characters whose personalities are the same. Woolf has eliminated the delineation between masculine and feminine in the novel has rendered the gender discussion senseless and meaningless. Woolf’s portrayal of gender roles in the novel suggests that rational and emotional qualities are important and may supersede the gender concepts. However, it is important to note that the stigmatization of characters’ exhibition is what bars the development of identity despite the gender.



On the other hand, Michael Ondaatje has presented the issue of womanhood in a quite different way from Woolf. While Woolf's protagonist, Clarissa's identity is influenced and determined by different experiences that create an external 'self' from her body that was initially rendered invisible, Michael Ondaatje's protagonist, Katherine's identity is strictly influenced by the internal factors (Zidan 36). The influence is strictly within her body. Ondaatje describes her with terms that conform to the physical sexual connotations. Unlike Woolf who tries to give her characters a voice, Ondaatje denies her characters a voice; thus, further problematizing the issue of characterization. Katherine is denied a voice; therefore, any impression that the readers get from her is out of the possessive gaze of her observer. As a postmodernist writer, Ondaatje explores the oppression and marginalization that resulted from colonization (Bake 43). She presents characters that are all defeated due to the war. Every character in the novel "The English Patient" has a sad story to tell. However, Ondaatje has not involved these characters with their predicaments so that the audience can sympathize with them; but he aims at evocatively presenting the oppression and marginalization after the colonial period. Towards the end of the novel, all the characters realize the reality of their predicaments that they are in a journey of self-discovery. As a result, they are able to resolve their identity conflicts and come to terms and harmony with their original identity lives. However, we are able to note the kind of disfigure that Ondaatje tries to use to distort the west as a form of revenge for the kinds of trauma and suffering that they have caused the people of Canada (Burcar 109).

Ondaatje has explored the issue of identity in various characters. Almasy, the protagonist in the novel is burnt beyond recognition. Out of this severe injury, he no longer identifies with anyone including himself. Although we are able to understand the kind of job that he held before he got burnt, but it is difficult to construct his real identity after the fire incident; he was a desert



explorer who helped the Germans navigate through the desert. He is now referred to as “The English Patient,” where the title of the book is derived. His real identity has been erased and we no longer look at him as the desert explore but as an English patient. Although his job of mapping out the desert has been used to describe the kind of job that Almsy held before he got burnt (Cook 36), but we can also deduce the literary meaning of oppression and marginalization which is the author’s main focus. The act of mapping out the desert is like giving a new or vast land a name. This means the act of gaining possession of something that was initially uncontrolled. Therefore, we get to understand that Almsy was used by the Germans to gain the lands of the natives while they camouflage on trade and exploration. Ondaatje writes that “the ends of the earth are never the points on a map that consist push against, enlarging their sphere of influence (Ondaatje 141).” The representation of Almsy as the desert explore depicts the presentation of the womanhood. Ondaatje presents Almsy as a highly politicized and collection of owned male physical parts. Literary, the mapping and controlling the vast desert area is symbolically used to show the presentation of domination of the female body. As Burca explains, the consequence to such kind of domination is that the ‘woman’ figure becomes a projected desire of others which are later translated as the woman’s identity (106). Ondaatje’s male characters are not presented as subjects of female gaze as female to the male gaze. Therefore, the male characters are represented with a kind of disembodiment that is never accorded to the female characters. This is because the male character’s identity is not reduced as it explored in female characters. For example, the contrast between Almsy and Katherine can be used to explain the representation of both genders. Unlike Katherine, Almsy is portrayed as a culturally neutral through his relationship with the surroundings. His job of being a desert explores is an extension of his characterization. Ondaatje succeeds to demonstrate the futility of placing the



boundaries on identity through Almasy's attempts to map the desert. The desert is a metaphor that has been used to depict the vastness and the transience within Almasy. He does not belong to any country. He has refused and rebuked the identities that have been imposed on them by the colonizers.

Again, Almasy's attempt to achieve cultural neutrality can be witnessed through the fire incidence. Although he is burnt, but the author has used it to show his refusal to conform to the new identity that has been imposed upon them. Almasy is burnt beyond recognition; his skin color has burnt such that he cannot be compared or identified with any person. Therefore, the author wanted to eliminate any racial marker that may have been used to describe Almay on the basis identity (Baker 43). However, we are able to identify his identity from the title of the book that suggests that he is an English man. Again, the fact that Almasy's body is burnt beyond recognition and the whole body turned black is literary implying the act of disfiguring the whites. The blackness that has charred Almasy's skin connotes the demise of western civilization after the Second World War (Burcar 108). Identity is difficult and almost impossible to evade.

The confusion of identity and personalities is also portrayed through the character, Kirpal Singh, an Indian immigrant who gets assimilated into the English society after attaining the social, economic, and political rituals required (Bussi 11). Ondaatje writes that "he walked over to a wall and stared at a barometer, was about to touch it but pulled back, just putting his face close to it" (Ondaatje 187). Kirpal admires the western civilization against any other desires. He admires the political, economic and social-cultural superiority that comes with the western names. Therefore, he is willing to do anything and everything to get assimilated into the western culture. He tries to adopt their cultures, norms, and values so that he can be assimilated into the



western culture (Haque 2). He engages in some of the ridiculous things with the aim of getting accepted by the colonizers. At first, he does not see what he is doing as wrong or bad; he only manages to see it later when he realizes that he has been denying his Indian identity to attain a new identity that does not even match him. Ondaatje writes that “Kirpal Singh had been befriended, and he would never forget it” (Ondaatje 187). What Kirpal had not realized is the type of relationship that exists between the colonized and the colonizers. The relationship is never beyond benefits and exploitation. The colonizers exploit the colonized and attain any benefit that they desire, while the colonized are left with nothing but suffering and humiliation. Kirpal’s attempt to suppress his Indian identity through abandoning the language, religion, the Indian traditional morals ethics and lifestyle also explains his quest for identity.

Kirpal’s attempt to refuse his identity shows that the issue of national identity is something that cannot be discarded. He has tried to do everything to get civilized into the western culture; among the things that he has done include shortening or abbreviating his name, drinking tea like the British and also joining a white family, Lord Suffolk. However, he cannot seem to forget or discard the reality of his ‘other’ self. The more he tries to get assimilated into the western culture, the more he realizes the gravity of the mistakes that he is doing. The bombing of Hiroshima by the western military illuminates him further that whatever he has been doing trying to be like the whites is nothing but stupidity. He learns something that he never saw before; he now understands the global hierarchy where the other races are viewed as merely mechanical enemies (Zidan 39). He learns that if it was a place populated by white people, Hiroshima would not have been bombed. The fact that he has been risking his identity to restore the superiority of others becomes very clear to him and he decides that he will never liken himself with another person. He tries to criticize the bombing of Hiroshima as an egocentric and



inhumane move; “when you start bombing the brown races of the world, you are an Englishman” (Ondaatje 286).

Although he has tried to criticize and denounce the selfishness of the whites, Kirpal seems not to have solved his identity conflict fully. Despite that he has realized the manipulation of the whites, “a black figure.....in the giant white horse of Westbury” (Ondaatje 193), Kirpal is still alienated in his home county. He managed to return to India, but he could discard the conflict if self-identity. He cannot forget the experience he had gone through while in the hands of the whites. However, he is hurt more not by the fact that he has returned home, but by the fact that he spent most of his time restoring the image of the people that do not regard others with the same dignity accorded to them. Kirpal’s comrades in the army do not regard him as an Englishman that he so desires; he is always ignored because of his skin (Ondaatje 70). Although he did not like it, but he came to prefer it with the fact that he was accustomed to his invisibility (Ondaatje 196).

Ondaatje contrasts characters who try to get assimilated and amalgamated into the western culture and those who rebel against the western culture. Almasi is a representation of the western people that had dominance over the colonized during the postcolonial period. Kirpal is a representation of the ‘other’ that tries to get assimilated and amalgamated into the western civilization (Zidan 37). Ondaatje explores the kinds of confusion of identities that resulted from colonialism era. Almasi represents the western civilization with the power and knowledge that enabled them to have dominance over the ‘other’ represented by Kirpal. The colonized are exposed to suffering and oppression. The colonized find it difficult to establish their life without mimicking the western culture. Colonization exposed the non-whites to traumatic experiences. A



good example in the novel “The English Patient” is the case of Hana, the Canadian nurse who dedicates herself to her job despite the challenges she has gone through. She has gone through many struggles and traumatic experiences after the death of her husband who was killed. She had to abort her unborn child after the death of her husband. With the kind of trauma that comes with the challenges that she has gone through, Hana is internally shattered. All the sorrows that she goes through exposing her to other risks (Haque 2); for example, she suffered a nervous breakdown. Despite all these challenges, Hana does not give up her job. She dedicates herself to her job; she provides services to the wounded that have been affected by the war. All her life has been surrounded by sorrows and trauma; therefore, it seems like she can cope with the trauma. Her encounter with people is limited and confined to the sick and wounded. However, she does not stop helping them. Almsy or the English Patient dies in front of her while she just stays there.

The placement of characters in the villa does not only portray their liminal location but also depicts the eagerness and desire by other races to relinquish their cultural origins. Including the western inhabitants also desire to disassociate their identity with the white western culture (Ondaatje 139). Most of the inhabitants are not pleased with the displacement and the cultural chaotic situation created by the outbreak of World War II. Therefore, they try to escape from the trauma caused by the World War effects (Burcar 113). Ondaatje manages to create characters that develop individually so as to show and demonstrate the need by both the westerners and ‘other’ to free themselves from the traumatic experiences caused by the World War II.

Both novels, however, have explored concerns of desire to attain self-identity through the different experiences shared by the characters. In the novel “The English Patient” Kirpal has



been blinded by the social, economic and political superiority of the western nations that has made him forget even his own identity. He no longer recognizes the Indian cultures, morals, and lifestyles because he has tried to suppress them (Cook 45). However, no matter how much he moves towards getting assimilated into the British culture, he still cannot discard the Indian culture. At long last, he manages to understand and realize that he has not been truthfully open with himself. He decides to return to his home in India as a way to catch up with the things that he has lost. He realizes that where he has been all along doing not fit him. The people he claims he wants to associate with do not recognize him as their equals no matter how hard he tries to please them.

The same concept is presented in the novel “Mrs Dalloway” by Virginia Woolf through different characters who want to attain their own identities. Although Woolf has presented the concept of identity in a different way than Michael Ondaatje, but the idea still comes out the same that characters desire to attain their self-identity. Woolf has presented characters whose conflict of identity is internally motivated. For example, Septimus who is in conflict with his consciousness is a similar case of characters being involved in self-conflict. Septimus is intimately and emotionally attached to Evans, something that he wonders how to express. Like Clarissa who cannot understand her feelings towards Sally, Septimus cannot understand his feelings towards Evans (Kingsland 13). However, the two situations are presented in a different way. Clarissa’s situation is involved in a societally acceptable conflict while Septimus is quite complicated as he has a homosexual fixation on another male person. Woolf’s presentation of parallel relationships depicts the concept of the quest for self-identity, but in a different way with Michael Ondaatje.



Although the two novels explore the same concept or idea through different means, but they are also different in the sense of how identity has been demonstrated. In the novel “Mrs Dalloway” characters are involved in a conflict of realizing their self-identity in the same environment. Characters are influenced by the internal factors that push for change, deniability, and acceptability of cultural morals and norms. Mrs Dalloway Clarissa is in a conflict of understanding her emotions. This is quite different to what we see in the novel “The English Patient” where Almasy and Kirpal are in conflict with their national identities. Although in some way they both present the self-identity but Ondaatje tries to explore it from a wider perspective. Characters are involved in a loyalty situation where they have to question which nation carries their loyalty. Although, the character Almasy is used to demonstrate the disfiguration of the western culture, but he also stands for the western dominance and superiority over other races (Haque 2).

In conclusion, the two novels have successfully depicted the concept of self-identity with minimal nostalgia and sentimentality. Inspired by the lives that they have grown through, the authors wrote the novels sharing their past in a manner that does not only evoke readers’ emotions but also engage them in thinking. Both authors have had trouble with gaining their identities. Virginia lost the people she loved while she was still young and she was left to face the challenges that the world present alone. Michael, on the other hand, was also involved in a struggle for self-identity in her journey from Sri Lanka to Canada via England. This is achieved through the characters that they use in their novels respectively. Both authors agree on the fact that concept of ‘self’ is determined by one’s ability to differentiate their internal perspectives of worldview. However, they have used characters in varied ways to demonstrate this reliability of egoless reality. For example, in Virginia Woolf’s novel “Mrs Dalloway” Clarissa demonstrates



the reliable sense of 'self' by remaining in her current situation and at the same time admiring for an outside life which she also looks on (Wolf 11). The perceptions that we as the audience are presented with through her memory presents her identity as connected with her past experiences. Her ability to cope with her past is the same with Hana's ability in Michael Ondaatje's novel "The English Patient" to cope with the cruel world that displaces and excludes people. Therefore, this disparity between internal identity in "Mrs Dalloway" and external identity in "The English Patient" makes it apparent that, while people can never know one another, neither can they understand themselves.

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