

Complexity and Uncertainty-The Gender Identities of Main Characters in the English Patient

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Abstract: *The English Patient*, is the masterpiece by Canadian author Michael Ondaatje, whose complex structure, various themes and identity concerns have always been the focus of controversy among literary critics. However, few of them explore the deconstruction of the main characters' gender identities in the novel. Thus, based on some theories relevant to identity concerns, the paper tries to analyze the gender identities of main characters in *The English Patient*, and explore the complexity and ambiguity of the theme and characters in the novel. It studies the characters' gender identities in four aspects to eliminate the binary opposition, and each aspect is represented by one or two characters. Then, the paper provides two cultural significances based on the research, which hopes to help people find a sense of belonging in the identity confusion and anxiety and gives a reference for the relevant researches on identity concerns.

Keywords: Gender identities, Four aspects, Elimination of the binary opposition, Complexity, Uncertainty

1. THE BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF THE ENGLISH PATIENT

The English Patient, a 1992 novel written by Michael Ondaatje, won the Booker Prize and the Governor General's Award. The book follows four dissimilar people brought together at an Italian villa during the Italian Campaign of World War II. The four main characters are: an unrecognizably burned man—the titular patient, Count Ladislaus de Almásy, presumed to be an English; his Canadian Army nurse Hana, a Sikh British Army sapper Kirpal (Kip) Singh, and a Canadian thief David Caravaggio. The story 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. The main characters in the story are equipped with multiple regional, national and ethnic identities, presenting that the identity of each person is complicated, ambiguous and uncertain. The specific historical, social and political background of war and colonial invasion resulted in the subversion and disorder of characters' identities, which are reflected not only in national identity, but also in gender identity. Then from the analysis of characters' gender identities to eliminate the binary opposition, the true equality across national boundaries and the spiritual comfort among people can help them find a sense of belonging in the identity confusion and anxiety.

As for the literature review of *The English Patient*, in China, researchers tended to explore the novel through the perspectives of narrative methods, themes, gender issues, power operation mechanism, nationalism, colonial issues, post-colonial symbolism, deconstruction and reconstruction of national identity, criticism of naturalism, feminism, binary oppositions and existentialism etc. While in other countries, many scholars analyzed the fiction at the view of themes (such as history, war, human desire, Christian ethics, memory), identities, narrative techniques, nationalism, colonial disintegration, postmodernism, allegory, eschatology, dimensions of love theology, cybernetics, machinery and metaphysics, digital revolution and so on. It can be said that the novel owns profound and rich connotation, which can be analyzed through various point of views. However, few researchers explored the relationship between gender identities and national identities after deconstructing the main character's identities. Thus, this paper attempts to deconstruct the identities of the main characters respectively, and discusses how their gender identities and national identities influences each other, providing a new point of view for the relevant researches.

2. SOME THEORIES RELEVANT TO IDENTITY CONCERNS

Jacques Derrida, a great master of deconstructionism, questions the central dominant structure of a certain meaning in structuralism theory, and holds the view that beyond the ideological habit of

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binary oppositions can be testified by the ways in which the two members of the opposition are not completely opposite. At the beginning of deconstruction reading, it determines the places where the text violates the order of its own rules, and the text becomes fragments full of contradictions. Literary text is “abstract” of potential meaning; readers need to reveal the text’s uncertainty and/or to reveal the complex operations of the ideologies of which the text is constructed. While in the novel, the complexity and uncertainty are mainly embodied in characters’ identities. According to Bhabha, identity is an intersubjective and performative action that rejects the boundaries between public and private, psychological and social. It is a ‘self’ that enters into consciousness through the domain of the symbolic ‘other’ —language, social system and the unconsciousness. The view that identity is built and dependent on the constructions of “other”, is the progress of the potential significance that questions the self-claimed superiority of identity of oppressors (or racists, colonialists, imperialists, dictators, paternalism, etc.), and marginal and oppressed groups can take it to challenge and renegotiate the identity of ‘other’, which is imposed on them to strive for the rights of subsistence, narrative and citizenship (Anfeng, 2004). As we all known, a character usually owns multiple identities but it doesn’t simply mean that he or she has several titles or occupations. As Bhabha has pointed out, dual identity is not equal to two identities, but refers to the repeatability of identity negotiation and its continuous repetition, revision and repositioning. No repetition is the same as the previous one.

As one of the most important factors of identity concerns, gender identity is distinguished on the basis of masculinity and femininity, not biological sex. Different from the inherent sex, gender identity is regarded as a social construct and a process of constant confirmation. Butler points out that gender is performative, reflected by repeated performances of the same behavior by social actors. Moreover, its performativity is of great political significance that when we are aware that we are performing, we can use this right to reconstruct our gender identities and write it into our scripts, so that we can constantly challenge and negotiate our gender position (Butler, 1990 & 1999). Joan Wallach Scott even emphasized that gender is a way of being for power relations. As a basic way to perform power, gender is associated with the concept and composition of power, because the distribution of power is often based on the concept of gender. Taking gender as a social relationship for researching aims to show that the formation of gender, like any social relationship, involves all parts of social culture, and it must be studied in a historical and specific way. And according to gender studies in sociological theories, one’s gender identity may or may not be consistent with his/her biological gender, and sometimes “androgyny” may occur. In other words, one has the androgynous consciousness, or takes a bisexual perspective (Xuesi,

2017). Thus, the gender identity is meaningful only when it is applied to specific analysis under specific conditions.

Thus, by discussing the gender identities of main characters in the literary text and eliminating the binary opposition, readers can deeply experience the complexity and uncertainty of the novel, experience the breakdown of power relations between male and female, the colonizer and the colonized, and explore how the author’s ideologies are presented.

3. ANALYSIS OF GENDER IDENTITIES OF MAIN CHARACTERS FROM FOUR ASPECTS

Gender identity is a process of continuous construction, and it can be reconstructed from the utterances and behaviors that constantly challenge and negotiate one’s gender position. What’s more, reconstructing the gender identities of main characters should focus on the loss of subjectivity of the colonizer and the colonized in the novel, which can be embodied in four aspects: firstly, the ambiguity of cognition; secondly, the absence of utterance; thirdly, the abandonment of intrinsic culture; fourthly, the loss of resistance. Therefore, the reconstruction of main characters’ identities is explored into above four aspects in sequence, and each aspect is corresponding to one or two characters.

3.1 Ambiguity of Cognition—Almásy

As William Bloom once said, identity is an intrinsic, unconscious behavioral requirement for any individual. The exploration of Almásy’s gender identity mainly focuses on the ambiguity of cognition. It can be said that the ambiguity of his cognition is both conscious and unconscious, which not only externalizes into his appearance and performance intentionally, but also internalizes into the contradiction in his consciousness.

The unrecognizability of appearance and performance is a symbol of the ambiguity of cognition. Almásy is the titular character who comes under Hana’s care in Italy after being burned unrecognizably in Africa. Although Hungarian by birth, because he has lived without government identification or many verifiable long-term interactions, his accent prompts the authorities around him to perceive an English affiliation and to refer to him as The English Patient. Almásy shifts nationalities throughout the course of the story; he is originally Hungarian, but is thought at some times to be British, at other times, German (Emery, 2000). On the one hand, as an amorphous figure in this context: Almásy’s identities—earl, lover, spy, geographer, loner, poet, etc...are changeable and unpredictable, as the novel focuses on what these erratic and multiple identities mean. On the other hand, being faceless is also important: multiple identities can be projected upon this character. Ondaatje creates such a vivid image

free from the shackles of “nationalism”, a freedom he affirms elsewhere in the novel (Younis, 1998). In the novel, Almásy could not make any facial expressions because of his severe burns that he has no face, no expression, and his nerves have been damaged. A blank-faced, expressionless protagonist can hardly imagine a romantic melodrama, though these traits help to reinforce Hana's nature of caring for patients.

Meanwhile, the contradiction in his consciousness is another kind of the ambiguity of cognition. The author seems focused on the dark side of nationalism and nationalist provocations such as the destruction caused by World War II. The novel tends to narrate the hatred of the states and the desire to abolish them, thus reflecting the desire to eliminate nationalism and its fragmentation. As Almásy has said, “Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations...I didn't want my name against such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert...But I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from...it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation.” (126-127). In his view, he and Kirpal are both international bastards—born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Almásy resents national identities, hence he has a multi-national identity, but never talks about his original identity to others. In Hana's presence, in particular, he always loses in memory, and acts like a learned and well-educated English gentleman. In his mind, he yearns for the desert and wants to get rid of the bondage of identity. Nevertheless, the desert is part of the map, which is essentially another manifestation of the national power struggles. These characterizations of Almásy reflect that his gender identity tends to be feminine. The novel's refusal to fix Almásy's identity exposes the gulf separating any one story—regardless of the comprehensiveness toward which it strives and that thing we call the historical real (Sadashige, 1998). This is the main reason why the ambiguity of cognition Almásy owns and presents. Thus, his gender identity can be reconstructed only when an external force destroys his disguise and inner contradiction. When this kind of ambiguity disappears, that is, his original identity is disclosed and he accepts death willingly, he acquires a new lease of life. Above all, national divergences seem to resolve in the faceless, expressionless face of “the English Patient”: under the gaze of Hana, he can be a German spy or an English patient. What's more, the contrast and conflict between the colonists and the colonized also seem to be deconstructed.

3.2 Absence of Utterance—Caravaggio & Patrick

It is common that women usually lose their voices in the literary works, however this seldom occurs to men. The absence of utterance is one of the important factors of analyzing gender identity. While in the novel,

the two characters Caravaggio and Patrick typically stand for the absence of utterance.

Caravaggio, is a Canadian thief whose profession is legitimized by the war, as the Allies needed crafty people to steal Axis documents. As mentioned in the novel, his identity is changeable that he is a long-time friend of Hana's father, a beloved uncle, a very humane thief and used to be a charming and prodigal lover for women. He would always be distracted by the human element while doing a job. For instance, if an advent calendar was on the wrong day, he would fix it. All these features make his gender identity masculine. Formerly, Hana also has deep feelings of love for Caravaggio. At times, Caravaggio seems to display a romantic love towards Hana. But now, he is an unknown middle-aged man, full of vicissitudes, being known as “the man with bandaged hands” when he arrives at the villa; the bandages cover his severed thumbs is the result of an interrogation by the Italians in Florence. There is not much description in the text about his speeches and mental activities in the face of torture. It should be noticed that in this important moment, his voice is deprived and resulted in that his later behavior and psychology can't be restored to a normal state. The mental and physical outcome of the torture is that Caravaggio has “lost his nerve” and ability to steal. Herein, his gender identity shifts from masculinity into femininity. In addition, it seems that the work of thief is not necessarily in the opposite of justice and morality. But it is not an advocacy of committing larceny, instead it stresses the uncertainty and ambiguity between virtues and vices in human nature.

As Hana's father, Patrick also loses his voice, and even his antemortem feelings are revealed by Hana. He is silent, gentle and friendly, loves small animals and hates disputes (87), which suggest that his gender identity tends to be feminine. According to Hana's letter to her step-mother Clara, Patrick is totally different from the traditional image of man, he is not tough and always keeps silent “In his sweet and complicated innocence. He was the most un verbal of men, and I am always surprised women liked him. We tend to like a verbal man around us... and he was often lost, uncertain, unspoken...How did Patrick end up in a dove-cot, Clara? His unit had left him, burned and wounded...He was a burned man and I was a nurse and I could have nursed him. Do you understand the sadness of geography?... How long was he alone with doves and rats? With the last stages of blood and life in him? ...Unable to sleep in the darkness. He always hated darkness. And he was alone, without lover or kin” (267-268). He owns somewhat characteristics of females, and he loves peace, his army and his country but is abandoned by them. Hereby, his characteristic and tragic result clearly subvert the opposition of men and women in the society of World War II. In other words,

men seem not superior to women because they also may face a doom even though owning a good virtue.

3.3 Loss of Resistance—Katharine

The reconstruction of gender identity also should focus on the efforts and struggles paid by a character in the power relations. In the novel, Katharine is the childhood friend and recently wedded wife of Geoffrey Clifton, and later has an affair with Almásy. Geoffrey discovers the affair after she has ended it, and attempts to kill all three of them by crashing his plane while they are flying. Then Geoffrey died in the crash, Katharine also died of the serious injury. Nevertheless, some scholars, such as Emery, argued that Katharine died because she was not identified according to her husband's last name, a patriarchal boundary the lovers had swept aside. Her adultery is a challenge to patriarchy culture, a kind of rebellion and an abandonment of traditional housewife image. However, she breaks off the relationship with Almásy due to her inner condemnation and pain, so that she is still under the shadow of and loses the resistance of patriarchy culture and morality.

Katharine symbolizes a kind of the disintegration, in which gender inequality seemed to be dissolved. According to the description of the novel, "There was classical blood in her face. Her parents were famous, apparently, in the world of legal history. I am a man who did not enjoy poetry until I heard a woman recite it to us...That night I fell in love with a voice. Only a voice. I wanted to hear nothing more. I got up and walked away." (132). Herein, the presentation of Katharine is replaced by her voice, which suggests a kind of "othering". As Almásy has thought that "she was smarter. She was hungrier to change than I expected" (205), Katharine realizes the inappropriateness and concealment between she and her husband, as she dislikes too much compliments from her husband in public and doesn't clearly know about what her husband has done because of confidentiality of his work. In addition, she notices the terrible and changeable nature of human being, especially of herself that "She did not have to remain a socialite who had married an adventurer. She was discovering herself." (205). Nevertheless, it was painful to watch, because Clifton could not see it, her self-education" (205). Due to the lack of understanding, she gradually put her eyes on Almásy and eventually falls in love with him, but strongly expresses her resentment of his camouflage in himself and interpersonal communication. For example, "When he talked like that she hated him, her eyes remaining polite, ... She always had the desire to slap him, and she realized even that was sexual. For him all relationships fell into patterns. You fell into propinquity or distance." (136), moreover, some tart words are used to depict Almásy that "When he behaved this way she liked him even less; they all had to pretend this pose was courtesy, graciousness. It reminded her of a dog in clothes." (137). What's more, she acts in the same way

to against Almásy and express her dissatisfaction, just as her words that "You built your walls too, she tells him, so I have my wall" (142). As it can be learned that she is extremely brave and eager for the true love, the true couple of soul.

"If you make love to me, I won't lie about it. If I make love to you, I won't lie about it."

She moves the cushion against her heart, as if she would suffocate that part of herself which has broken free. "What do you hate most?" he asks. "A lie. And you?" "Ownership," he says. "When you leave me, forget me." (138)

Gender is dynamic, and is constructed, negotiated or challenged by discourse in the process of communication (Yiqing, 2008). As the above dialogue which occurs at the beginning of their relationship, she threatens Almásy even in fear, and directly express her detestation of lies, which seem somewhat likely to false and camouflage. Later, when suffering from the emotional anguish of escapade, she gets crazy and says tearfully "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do! How can I be your lover? He will go mad." After she has created a list of wounds on Almásy for abreacting, she begins to be sober-minded and decisively decides to end the wrong relationship with him. For Almásy, he is painful for her leave, "without Katharine, his hunger wishes to burn down all social rules, all courtesy". "What he would say he cannot say to this woman whose openness is like a wound, whose youth is not mortal yet. He cannot alter what he loves most in her, her lack of compromise, where the romance of the poems she loves still sits with ease in the real world. Outside these qualities he knows there is no order in the world." (143). These thoughts imply that Katharine is the ruler of his world, which seems that such a woman still stands an equal position as man in the domain of love. She is not inferior to men, but bravely pursues true love and decisively pays the fiddler of her misbehaves. Her emotional growth and changeable mind gradually disintegrate the opposition between men and women that everyone is imperfect and may easily lead by emotion. Nevertheless, on the other hand, her courage is resulted from the inner condemnation and pain, which is actually the outcome of patriarchy culture and morality. Thus, it can be said that her gender identity is both masculine and feminine.

3.4 Abandonment of Intrinsic Culture—Hana & Kirpal

Last but not least, the study of gender identity should take the intrinsic culture into account. Especially, when a character abandons his or her intrinsic culture, it means that he or she makes a compromise, and his or her gender identity shall be greatly influenced.

No matter in utterances or behaviors, Hana has always been in a rebellious state. It is even a kind of self-exile for her to give up everything to accompany the English patient in the dilapidated St. Kilorama villa. Actually, Hana is a continuation and parody of Katharine. Different from Katharine, Hana is another kind of rebellion and decomposition of traditional mode of females. She is a twenty-year-old Canadian Army nurse torn between her youth and maturity. As the novel mentioned, "She was twenty years old and mad and unconcerned with safety during this time, having no qualms about the dangers of the possibly mined library or the thunder that startled her in the night." (13). Being a good nurse, she quickly learns that she cannot become emotionally attached to her patients. She calls them all "buddy" and forgets them immediately once they die. Herein, she abandons some lady-like characteristics, such as weakness, lachrymose tendency and nostalgic feeling, which suggests her gender identity tends to the side of masculinity.

Nevertheless, her gender identity is changed by four men. Her lover, a Canadian officer, is killed by war and because of this, Hana comes to believe that she is cursed and that all those around her are doomed to die. And later, upon hearing of her father's death Hana has an emotional breakdown. She then puts all of her energy into caring for Almásy. When the hospital is abandoned, Hana refuses to leave, staying with Almásy. She regards Almásy as her despairing saint and falls in love with his pure nature (3), as the narration of the novel "She was living like a vagrant, while elsewhere The English Patient reposed in his bed like a king" (13). For Hana, he is not only a spiritual redemption, but also a medium to compensate for her inability of her father's death and grief. From this point, it suggests that her gender identity tends to the side of femininity. Then, she becomes independent and sets her own principles, like that "she drew her own few rules to herself. She would not be ordered again or carry out duties for the greater good" (13). Such as that she screams to Caravaggio that "Who the hell were we to be given this responsibility, expected to be wise as old priests, to know how to lead people towards something no one wanted and somehow make them feel comfortable. I could never believe in all those services they gave for the dead...How dare they! How dare they talk like that about a human being dying" (80), when he persuades Hana to leave Almásy. Hana's sharp words indicate that her detest and abandonment of intrinsic culture. In addition to her relationship with Almásy, Hana also forms a strong relationship with Kip during his stay at the villa. Although Kip leaves Hana after desperation upon the so-called justice of British and American people, he still loves and memorizes her in the old age.

"She will, he realizes now, always have a serious face, she has moved from being a young woman into having the angular

look of a queen, someone who has made her face with her desire to be a certain kind of person. He still likes that about her....

And Hana moves possibly in the company that is not her choice. She, at even this age, thirty-four, has not found her own company, the ones she wanted. She is a woman of honor and smartness whose wild love leaves out luck, always taking risks.... Idea land idealistic in that shiny dark hair! People fall in love with her."

Based on Kirpal's thoughts, Hana is a charming woman and it is not so much because of her smartness and beauty as because of her changeable mind and ambiguity. Her characteristics and personal growth fuzzify the traditional concept of women. She is either a fragile woman, seeking spiritual redemption and love through other people, or a courage woman, sharply expressing her resentment of war and pain of war and waiving all fallback to be true self. Obviously, Hana's gender identity is both masculine and feminine. Her performance dissolves the traditional mode of women, and it seems that she strengthens the fuzzification of characters in the novel.

As Wang Ning has pointed out that the identity of the colonized has gone through the process of changing from one to multiple identities, thus he or she also has dual national and cultural identities that adopts both the nostalgia for hometown and the customs of suzerain. As a colonized subject, Kirpal resides in the margins between competing cultures and ways of knowing. Arriving in Britain to train for the war, Kirpal's Indian name is taken from him. Instead, the diminutive form of Kipper, "the young Sikh had been thereby translated into a salty English fish" (81). It is not simply his name that is altered, but his national identity is removed and his ontological status is reduced from a man to an English fish. It means that Kirpal abandons part of his intrinsic culture intentionally or unintentionally. Therefore, from this point of view, his gender identity more tends to be feminine in that his thoughts and behaviors are sensitive, flexible and cautious.

And Kirpal has special enriching experience of war, which embodies the uneasy relationship between the English he works for and his colonial homeland India. In a sense, he belongs to both worlds but remains an embarrassing position—an outsider and a wanderer. In other words, Kirpal is full of contradictions of loyalty and dual culture, and his daily job and encounter with Almásy, Hana and Caravaggio in the run-down St. Kilorama villa obviously highlight that these cross-cultural relationships cannot simply summarize or label to the problems of the oppress and oppressed, colonizer and colonized (Novak, 2004). Kirpal does not regard all Englishmen as aggressors,

nor does he believe that the colonial acts had no positive effects—although the effects on his life and family were enormous, and in some ways even destructive. He seems to have a flexible understanding of the relationship between state and identity. In other words, he seems to reject the binary oppositions that has been used frequently to describe the relationship between colonial expansion and liberation. Even he has angrily roared that “You and then the Americans converted us. 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 this? Here... listen to what you people have done.” (255) after learning that the Americans had dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. He feels extremely disappointed and accuses to Almásy, “Never trust Europeans... 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” (257). Then, he just leaves away the villa and never goes back. It reflects that he always dreams of balance and harmony between self and others, but never actively seeks any solution to deal with the problems.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on deconstructing the binary opposition and analyzing the loss of subjectivity, the gender identities of the representative figures are explored through four aspects. From Almásy’s ambiguity of cognition, Caravaggio and Patrick’s absence of utterance, Katharine’s loss of resistance to Hana and Kirpal’s abandonment of intrinsic culture, it can be known that the gender identity of each person has always been changeable and androgynous, except that of Patrick. It is the complexity and uncertainty of characterization that lead to the diversified themes of the novel. While for the gender identity of Patrick, it may be resulted from the narrow description of Patrick, and the author intentionally creates an unchanging, gentle and feminine image of father who has a miserable end. It is safe to assume that the author uses his tragic death to drive Hana’s gender identity transforming from the numbness and masculinity to the intrinsic and seductive femininity eventually. Through the above analysis, these male characters with different features obviously different from the traditional machismo image—strong and invulnerable, justice. While the female characters eventually turn back to the images that conform to the moral standard and public expectation.

There are two cultural significances of the study of gender identities. It should be noticed that there are hardly any heroism and praiseworthy qualities in the novel, the core of the novel seems to be broken down, then what presented to readers are the fuzziness and uncertainty. One cultural significance is embodied on the aspect of ideological enlightenment. As Sheng

Anfeng has mentioned that, transcending the binary opposition of cultural knowledge and values doesn’t mean denying the characteristics of historical traditions, national and historical differences, or the undeniable relationship between economic power and domination that continues to create an unbalanced and unequal world system. But the minorities can learn to reject the arrogant claims of so-called cultural superiority, and the shallow claims based on cultural hierarchy, racial superiority or historical superiority. And another cultural significance is reflected on the questions of identity demand and equality. The colonists themselves also contained conflicts between gender identities (Lianjie, 2019). For instance, the gender identity of each character is a challenge and interrogation to nationalism, colonialism and individual values. Besides, according to Bhabha, the colonized is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer. Rather, complicity and resistance exist in fluctuating relation within the colonial discourse that relates to the colonized, for it may be exploitative and nurturing at the same time (Aiting, 2007). Meanwhile, it also suggests that female’s independence and courage are necessary no matter in what time and what place, and being the true self is the only way to keep freedom.

There are still some weaknesses in the study because of limited space, and the paper hopes to provide a reference for the relevant researches and calls for more researches on the identity concerns.

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