

**‘Navigating the Tidal Pull’**

**Representations of the Modern-Postmodern Tension**

**in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* and**

***Anil’s Ghost*.**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis shall examine the representation of the modern-postmodern tension through imagery in two of Michael Ondaatje's novels, *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*. Written in 1992 and 2000, respectively, these novels have previously undergone a thorough exploration under a conventional postcolonial framework, with critics analyzing how each novel expresses the issues stemming from imperial colonization. Using this existing research as a foundation, I believe one may expand this examination by considering how the postcolonial model's Western-Eastern dichotomy may also be read as a manifestation of a modern-postmodern tension.

Exploring the novels imagery from a modern-postmodern viewpoint requires a clear classification of which elements constitute 'modernism' and 'postmodernism', and how these ideas draw upon the concepts of the 'colonial' and the 'postcolonial' which are so often employed to examine Ondaatje's work. For the purpose of this thesis, I shall take the alignment of specific values and characteristics with each ideological perspective as a given, particularly both novels connection of modernist and postmodernist concepts with a Western and Eastern viewpoint, respectively. Therefore, I read *The English Patient* as firmly linking a Western perspective with modernist ideals of clarity, order and defined knowledge through the novel's use of naming and mapping imagery, while the postmodern is connected to a sense of ambiguity and mingled, vague ideas of identity and truth. These associations resonate with those of *Anil's Ghost*, which I

read as correlating Anil's Western outlook with the modernist arena of forensic science and validated truth, while, in contrast, Sri Lanka is connected to a sense of postmodernist uncertainty and chaos through the novel's use of hazy, environmental imagery. I do not propose these associations as an ideological truth, but instead as tools which allow a clear exploration and comparison of the novels through a modern-postmodern lens.

*The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* both attach specific ideals and traits to each side of the modern-postmodern divide, before expressing the tension that exists between these two viewpoints. While the modernist-postmodernist dichotomy is made apparent in both novels, through its key characters, each text offers a divergent representation of how this binary edifice manifests. This variation is, seemingly, attributable to the contrasting period in which each novel is set: while *The English Patient* reflects an ambiguous, dynamic sense of the modern-postmodern tension which fits within the context of its setting in the transitional society at the close of World War II, *Anil's Ghost* expresses this in a more definitive tone which resonates with elements of the text's setting in a contemporary world which clearly divides the privileged from the ignored. Therefore, *Anil's Ghost* offers a comparatively lucid representation of each character's motivations and choices within the modern-postmodern tension, portraying a sense of clarity which contrasts with *The English Patient*'s more opaque representation, as the latter shows how the individual experiences of each character means they are shunted and directed between the two stances by the 'tidal pull' which characterises the modernist-postmodernist tension.

**‘Navigating the Tidal Pull’**

**Representations of the Modern-Postmodern**

**Tension in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient***

**and *Anil’s Ghost*’**

**Introduction**

An innovative critical reading of Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*<sup>1</sup> and *Anil’s Ghost*<sup>2</sup> requires a new analytical approach to the idea of what constitutes ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’, and how these ideas draw upon the concepts of the ‘colonial’ and the ‘postcolonial’ which are so often employed to examine Ondaatje’s work. Taking the closing scenes of World War II in Italy and contemporary Sri Lanka as their focus, the novels are highly suitable for exploration under a traditional post-colonial framework, with many critics documenting the literary effect of each text’s placement of the West in a dominant colonial position and the East in the role of a recovering, emerging identity.

However, using this existing research as a foundation, one may expand this

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<sup>1</sup> Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, 1992. References hereafter in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Ondaatje, Michael. *Anil’s Ghost*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, 2000. References hereafter in the text.

examination of Ondaatje's literature by considering how the postcolonial model's Western-Eastern dichotomy may also be read as a manifestation of a modern-postmodern tension. This exploration of each novel's imagery - and how this represents a sense of the fluctuating 'tidal pull' which characterises the modernist-postmodernist tension - connects the two texts and allows a fresh, comparative overview of the intricacies of these two novels.

Postcolonial literary criticism encompasses varying attitudes and applications, ranging from the view that such literature is written as a resistance against the "colonial", to the belief that this is a sign the "colonial" continues to "shape cultures whose revolutions have overthrown formal ties to their former colonial rulers"<sup>3</sup>. The latter view, that such literature shows a continued colonial impact, is perhaps the most relevant when examining Ondaatje's literature, as this mutually influential relationship between the coloniser and the colonised resembles the ongoing tension between the key modern and postmodern ideologies. This form of postcolonial criticism recognises the mutual influence of both the coloniser and the colonised upon one another, an approach which, Reed notes, "owes a good deal to post-structuralist linguistic theory as it has influenced and been transformed by the three most influential postcolonial critics, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha" (1). Said's work on the nature of the "Orient" holds particular importance in this field, Reed observes, as Said's argument, that "the Orient" was "a fantastical, real material-discursive construct of 'the West' that simultaneously influenced and shaped "the real and imagined

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<sup>3</sup> Reed, T.V 'Theory and Method in American Cultural Studies', Washington State University, [www.wsu.edu/~amerstu/tm/poco.html](http://www.wsu.edu/~amerstu/tm/poco.html). P.1.

existences of those subjected to the fantasy”, proved fundamental in developing the idea of colonial and colonised nations forming postcolonial culture through a “complex, mutually constitutive process, enacted with nuances across the range of the colonized world(s), and through a variety of textual and other practices”(2). The postcolonial is a formative element of what critics see reflected in literature emerging from both colonial and colonised cultures. However, this cross-influence remains largely imbalanced, and requires the associated quantifier of ‘transnationality ’ and “the term “transnationalism” to denote the complex new flow of culture (in all directions, though hardly equally) resulting from the current mobility of people, capital, and ideas across national boundaries” (Reed, 2).

The field of postcolonial criticism described by Reed questions whether literature represents a rebellion against colonial power or the adoption of such colonial influences by the colonised, creating an undefined exchange of culture that gives rise to the concept of transnationalism referred to above. By its very interconnectedness and ambiguity, transnationality offers a possible segue between the modern and the colonial, and the postmodern and the postcolonial, yet the increasingly pertinent question remains: what exactly are the commonalities and divergences between the postcolonial and the postmodern? Further, what does a modern-postmodern reading of these two novels add to the existing analysis of Ondaatje’s literature?

“Without a doubt”, asserts Roger Berger, “many oppositional features of post-modernism resemble that of post-colonialism”<sup>4</sup> (4), and the “terminological

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<sup>4</sup> Berger, Roger. Book Review of *Past the Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, Calgary: U Calgary P, 1990. Department of English,Witchita State University.

imprecision” (2) inherent to postmodernism makes defining such a border problematic. “Post-modernism is”, Berger continues, “simultaneously (or variously) a textual practice (often oppositional, sometimes not)...a definition of western, postindustrial culture...and the emergent or always already dominant culture” (2). By comparison, the postcolonial is “simultaneously (or variously) a geographical site, an existential position, a political reality, a textual practice, and the emergent or dominant global culture (or counter-culture)” (2). On a surface reading these two concepts appear inter-related and equally self-reflexive, yet the contrasting manner in which each approaches literature means the juxtaposition is extreme. Berger observes that while postmodernism chooses to explore “the collapse of critical space between the western media spectacle and the production of a post-modern subjectivity” (2), this has very little to do with the postcolonial focus upon “the lived realities of oppression in the dominated world – with the lack of health care, food, electricity, education and an abundance of western appropriation of labor, raw materials, and imposition of a cultural imperialism” (2). The contrast, therefore, lies in the way each perspective critiques literature: because a postcolonial reading seeks to capture the realities of life in a nation formerly ruled by colonials, it engages with issues in a concrete way.

Postmodernism tends towards the abstract, sometimes overlooking the gritty daily struggles which may exist beneath a rarified argument, adopting a leisurely, debating tone which may inadvertently minimize the human suffering implicit in colonization. A modern-postmodern approach however, may also add a broader

angle to the close-focus tactics of the postcolonial, and therefore augment such analysis with an expanded, more hypothetical view.

The final component of the above question – how does a modern-postmodern reading enhance the existing analysis of this literature – requires a slightly tentative answer, given that the continual evolution and sophistication of the postcolonial framework means such a reading of *The English Patient* or *Anil's Ghost* would clearly make a further contribution to the existing understanding of the novels. A postcolonial approach uncovers a rich seam of resonance in Ondaatje's work, and the manifestation of these aspects in *each* novel are documented in the work of authors including Josef Pesch<sup>5</sup>, Mark D. Simpson<sup>6</sup>, J.U. Jacobs<sup>7</sup>, Anthony R. Guneratne<sup>8</sup>, Robert Fraser<sup>9</sup>, Hsuan L. Hsu<sup>10</sup>, Sandeep Sanghera<sup>11</sup> and Victoria Cook<sup>12</sup>. Employing postcolonial theory to a varying degree, these critics explore Ondaatje's work largely through its transnational themes, using postmodern analysis to a greater or lesser extent. Some authors do extend their scope beyond the strictly postcolonial to explore how identity affects

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<sup>5</sup> Pesch, Josef. 'Globalized Nationalisms: Michael Ondaatje's Novels and (Post)Colonial Correctness. *Zeitschrift fur Kanada-Studien* 17:1 [31], 1997, pages 96-109.

<sup>6</sup> Simpson, Mark D. 'Minefield Readings: The Postcolonial English Patient'. *Essays on Canadian Writing*, (53) 1994 Summer, pg 216-237.

<sup>7</sup> Jacobs, J.U. 'Exploring, Mapping and Naming in Postcolonial Fiction: Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*'. *Nomina Africana: Journal of the Names Society of Southern Africa*, (8:2) 1994 November, pages 1-12.

<sup>8</sup> Guneratne, Anthony R. 'The Chronotypes of Mongrel Literatures: Rushdie, Ondaatje, Naipaul and the Problems of Postcoloniality'. *World Literature Written in English*, 37:1-2, 1998, pages 5-23.

<sup>9</sup> Fraser, Robert. 'Postcolonial Cities: Michael Ondaatje's Toronto and Yvonne Vera's Bulawayo'. *Studies in Canadian Literature* (26:2) 2001, pages 44-52.

<sup>10</sup> Hsu, Hsuan L. 'Post-Nationalism and the Cinematic Apparatus in Minghella's Adaptation of Ondaatje's *The English Patient*'. In Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven, *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*, West Lafayette, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Sanghera, Sandeep. 'Touching the Language of Citizenship in Ondaatje' *Anil's Ghost*'. In Tötösy de Zepetnek's *Comparative Cultural Studies in Michael Ondaatje's Writing*, Pages 83-91.

<sup>12</sup> Cook, Victoria. 'Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*'. In Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven, *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*, West Lafayette, 2005, pg 6-15.

individuals across all global borders, allowing a minor sense of the postmodern to seep in. This slight merging is noted by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, who comments on Cook's exploration of "identity that traverses cultural and national boundaries"<sup>13</sup> and Sanghera's examination of the postmodern aspects of *Anil's Ghost*, particularly its representation of the postmodern identity through Anil's "foreign-ness" and "the languages Anil adopts and abandons in the novel"<sup>14</sup>. However, while these pieces of analysis do expand the literary review of Ondaatje's work slightly beyond the purely postcolonial, this approach is infrequent and has not been widely applied in a two-novel comparison, as this thesis seeks to present.

The usual postcolonial approaches to Ondaatje delve into each text in isolation from the other using the tightly-focused postcolonial line of inquiry described by Nicholas Thomas as "distinguished, not by a clean leap into another discourse, but by its critical reaccentuation of colonial and anti-colonialism"<sup>15</sup>. Although a postmodern approach draws upon previous postcolonial research, I believe it is also sufficiently dissimilar to grant new insights, particularly as aligning ideas of the modern-postmodern with the Western-Eastern divide allows an exploration and comparison of *both* novels alongside one another rather than singly. Thus, although Berger writes that "ultimately, it must be noted, post-modernism would seem to need post-colonialism far more than post-colonialism

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<sup>13</sup> Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven, *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*, West Lafayette, 2005, pg 2.

<sup>14</sup> Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven, *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*, West Lafayette, 2005, pg 4.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, Nicholas. *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*, Oxford: Polity Press, 1994. Page 7. Cited in Adam Stolorow's article 'Interviewing My Own Authoritative Voice: The Definition, Usefulness, and Limitations of the Term Postcolonial'. English 27, Brown University, Autumn 1997.

needs post-modernism" (4), to consider Ondaatje's novels from a modern-postmodern viewpoint does not necessitate the exclusion of a postcolonial approach; it simply utilizes the existing framework and seeks to extend its reach.

This study of Michael Ondaatje's representation of aspects of modernism and postmodernism through naming, truth and identity imagery in *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*, relies on a postcolonial framework to provide reference and a sense of positioning. Each novel clearly contains elements of the postcolonial, particularly evident in the 'colonial- subject' nature of Almásy and Kirpal's relationship, and the diasporic sense of identity exhibited by Anil. Sheltering in a bombed Italian villa at the close of World War II, *The English Patient*'s multi-national group of characters evoke postcolonial issues relating to 'authentic' identity and transferred nationality, an ambiguous mood of social transition which hazily considers ideas of Western and Eastern authority until the sharp shock of the Hiroshima bombing invades their Edenic sanctuary. Similarly, Anil's 'pseudo-homecoming' to her birth nation as a Western-educated, detached ex-patriot specialist raises questions of how identity and belonging are skewed by the postcolonial experience, although *Anil's Ghost* explores concepts of the West and East in a comparatively concise, functional tone.

However, a postcolonial approach to these two novels does not offer an exhaustive analysis: the epiphany of Kirpal Singh can readily be examined from a postcolonial perspective, yet to do so underplays the individual motivations and ideology which evoke such an abrupt reaction. When focusing – as this thesis does – primarily upon Kirpal, Almásy, Madox and Anil, the novels make it

difficult to use a postcolonial approach, as this framework can prove somewhat limiting; these characters are indeed products of their birthplace, but they are also a function of their place within their families, their experience of the war, their individual direction and their interactions with each other. Kirpal is not his brother, nor is he his family and although these are components of his character, he is not totally defined by his status as a postcolonial subject and may also be read as a product of converging modernist and postmodernist viewpoints.

Similarly, considering Anil Tissera's experience in Sri Lanka solely as a function of her postcolonial status risks overlooking the specific biases and beliefs that have also created her unique perspective, with the novel presenting these elements through a fusion of imagery which expresses the mix of occupational rebellion and an adopted name which leaves Anil unable to comfortably accept a conventional postcolonial identity. Although a postcolonial reading may recognise elements of colonial oppression in the interactions of the character of Count Ladislaus de Almásy and Kirpal Singh, their relationship also consists of multiple reflexive layers evolving from personal ideas of truth, identity, and experiences, which cannot be entirely explained by their position within a Western-Eastern dichotomy. Similarly, a postcolonial examination would also perhaps minimize the individual aspects of the tragedy of Madox; although his experience is rooted in his beliefs of traditional security and sanctified lineage, he nonetheless represents more than mere stereotypical British imperialism. Because of these limitations, although this thesis draws strongly upon the preceding work of critics who have taken a postcolonial approach, it also seeks to add a new

dimension by looking at the elements of the characters which *do not* fit neatly into a postcolonial perspective. Though a modern-postmodern exploration of the novels may grant less emphasis to the postcolonial ideas of events occurring as the direct result of specific Western discursive practice – a previously well-examined area of critical analysis – it does highlight the internalized, more abstract, intangible, ideological struggles of each character, and explore how these issues arise and resonate between the two novels. The framework of modernism and postmodernism thus acknowledges these aspects of each novel while also allowing greater access to *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*, as by avoiding the slightly limiting scope of post colonialism, one can forge a more cohesive link between the novels and allow a clarified, aggregate view of the variation and commonalities between their overall messages.

These complex, and at times contradictory, representations of the concepts of truth, identity and nationality in *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* demand a clear interpretation of definitions of the ‘modern’ and the ‘postmodern’ in order to meaningfully compare the two novels and attain a contemporary perspective. Through landscape and naming imagery, each text associates values and political ethics with each movement, with these connotations emphasising the contrasts and commonalities of each style. To put it concisely, I read the novels’ imagery as linking Western attitudes with a modernist outlook, and with the associated connotations of order, safety, limitations, traditionalism. In contrast, the East is firmly aligned with postmodernism and its elements of chaos and tentative safety, yet also with a certain freedom to mould an elected, hybridised identity. *Anil's*

*Ghost* takes as its subject the complexities of the divide that separates Western and Eastern ideals, depicting Anil's Western ideals as indicative of a clinical, clear modernist outlook, in the midst of a Sri Lankan environment which evokes the confusion and chaotic uncertainty which characterises the postmodern. The novel does not attempt to privilege or reconcile each side of this global dichotomy, instead focusing the reader upon the *process* of identifying the commonalities and utter differences between the modernist and postmodernist viewpoints, and leaving the two predominantly disconnected at the conclusion. Passages like the acknowledgement of her diasporic identity Anil exhibits when she proclaims "I think you murdered hundreds of us" (272) can thus be read as a brief overlap of the modernist and postmodernist spheres rather than the suggestion of a permanent cooperation, a scene which, Manav Ratti notes, "allows Ondaatje to collapse the abstractness of the elsewhere and of the national-ethnic other...a collapsing of boundaries consonant with the formal impulse of this novel to demonstrate the polyphonous "sobs and whispers" that defy the univocality of legal discourses"<sup>16</sup>, without entirely combining the two realms. The novel's representation of Western and the Eastern perspectives as divergent and, at times, combative, emphasises questions of how each side is portrayed rather than pushing for a reconciliation or merger. The tension of the West and East can therefore also be read as a fluctuating modern-postmodern boundary rather than the defined colonial-coloniser approach favoured by postcolonial criticism, with the text conveying what Ratti terms "the process of representation" (122) through

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<sup>16</sup> Ratti, Manav. 'Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Human Rights' *A Review of International English Literature*, Volume 35, 1-2, January-April 2004. Pages 121-141.

the varying approaches of Anil and Sarath, in particular, and the contrasting environmental imagery which places visions of Western boundaries in juxtaposition to Eastern miasma. This allows the novel to maintain a distance between the two viewpoints, while still expressing the “rich convergence between human rights as a politico-legal discourse, the aesthetic space of the novel form, and the historical condition” (122) of twenty-first century Sri Lanka. *Anil’s Ghost* thus navigates a dichotomous divide by keeping the two predominantly separated in order to emphasise the divergence, and through this, the oppression of the Eastern discourse, as noted by Ratti who considers Ondaatje’s literature a challenge to the “abstracting and monological voice of the state” (123), aligning modernist symbols with modernist values (and the same for the postmodern) so that “the empire of the sign becomes coextensive with an empire of ethics” (123).

This thesis seeks to offer a revitalized perspective of the oppositional elements of *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost* by exploring how the novels offer a varying and converging representation of the modern and postmodern through imagery, given that this tension may be read as symbolic of Western and Eastern ideals. I read *The English Patient* as suggesting that modernism resonates with Western ideals of clarity, truth and defined identity, and a belief in bordered, established concepts of nationality. By comparison, both texts place the postmodern alongside societies of more questionable democratic bounds, questioning the significance of such uncertain nationality as a foundation for identity and the complexities of Western dominance over Eastern discourse explored through a modern-postmodern lens. *Anil’s Ghost* makes this association

more distinctly than *The English Patient*, posing the luxurious assumptions of Western democracy in sharp contrast to the disintegrated safety of the public sphere in post civil-conflict Sri Lanka. Through its more relaxed approach, *The English Patient* allows the chance for a more positive reading of these terms by leaving elements of opportunity and freedom at its conclusion. The reader can therefore find a segment of optimism in this novel, grasping some comfort in the concluding association of postmodernism with the autonomy to choose an identity and life path rather than simply following the allotted version connected with a modernist existence.

Read from a modernist-postmodernist viewpoint the representation of the modern-postmodern tension takes a contrasting approach in 2000's *Anil's Ghost* compared with Ondaatje's 1992 work, *The English Patient*, with the former offering a relatively concrete division of the two elements in comparison to the latter's more hybridised approach. Examining the two novels' imagery through such a framework adds insight while simultaneously raising further questions: what influenced Ondaatje, for instance, to present the texts imagery in this manner? I believe this divergence in imagery may be largely attributable to the different period in which each novel is set. The oscillating expression of ideas of nationality, identity, and truth through the use of cartographical, scientific, and naming imagery in *The English Patient* differs from the more defined, lucid manner in which these themes emerge in *Anil's Ghost*, perhaps suggesting the contrasting influence of the transitional social period of 1944 compared to that of Sri Lanka in 2000, with the former offering less entrenched social roles than the

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latter. This thesis seeks to describe and explore the representation of these issues within each novel, before comparatively discussing the varying approaches employed in the two texts as a manifestation of the contrasting social moods of the times in which each novel is set. Chapter Two of this thesis shall explore the representation of Kirpal Singh's nationality and identity in *The English Patient*, preceding Chapter Three's discussion of the expression of modernist mapping and truth with regard to Almásy. Chapter Four will shift focus towards *Anil's Ghost*, examining the novel's depiction of segregated modernist and postmodernist imagery related to ideas of nationality and identity in Sri Lankan society. Chapter Five shall compare and summarise the two novels' representations.

## Chapter One

### **‘Representations of the Modern-Postmodern Tension in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost*.’**

As one reads Michael Ondaatje’s novels *The English Patient*<sup>17</sup> and *Anil’s Ghost*<sup>18</sup>, representations of nationality, identity, and truth oscillate in ways that capture the complexity of the modern-postmodern tension, expressing first modernity, then postmodernity, the latter a movement attuned with and against a referential modernist undercurrent threading through each work. Elements of both ideological positions emerge through each novel’s treatment of landscape, naming, and [scientific] imagery, conveying the sense of assurance found in cartography and forensic investigation, and posing this security against the unanchored nuances of moving, anonymous deserts, trans-national identities and the fluctuations of society in the transitory vacuum of recent warfare. The two novels’ alignment of Western and Eastern society with the concepts of modernism and postmodernism respectively, creates a set of contrasting values between which characters vacillate. The representation of this fluctuation varies significantly between the two novels, however, largely with respect to the degree of identity resolution offered within each text’s conclusion. Depicting its two key characters as alternately attracted to, and repulsed by each stance because of

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<sup>17</sup> Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Ondaatje, Michael. *Anil’s Ghost*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, 2000.

conflicting individual experience, *The English Patient* conveys the resulting modern-postmodern tension as a fluid spectrum within which each person floats. The novel therefore denies its characters a definitive outlook, instead presenting a quasi-conclusion that shows each in possession of an ideologically hybridised identity which operates with varying success. By contrast, *Anil's Ghost* conveys modernism and postmodernism as separate and defined positions, affiliated to the dominant West and the largely ignored East, respectively. Where *The English Patient* suggests the modern and postmodern are simply each side of the same coin, *Anil's Ghost* presents the two as different currencies delineated by the Western-Eastern divide that segregates the contemporary global map. This thesis seeks to explore the expression of the modern and postmodern both within each novel and between the two texts, examining the diverging depictions of this tension through selected imagery, and considering the sources and implications of this deviation. As Michael Ondaatje's literature draws vivid inspiration from the author's own trans-national status as a Sri Lankan who has spent much of his life in the West, critics often approach their analysis of these novels from a postcolonial, rather than a fundamentally stylistic, standpoint. Such methods mean critics frequently explore the novels' sense of confusion and mingled identities as products of the collective process of colonization, rather than viewing such ambiguity as an individual epiphany influenced, but not solely, by the character's postcolonial status. By exploring instead this Western-Eastern dichotomy within a modern-postmodern context, this thesis aims to add a new angle to the existing critical material dissecting these two novels. This thesis, therefore, recognises the

alignment of certain values and characteristics of modernism and postmodernism with the West and East simply as a tool, not a truth, with which to explore the role and representation of the modern-postmodern tension in *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*.

### **Shifting Social Sands: From Modernity to Postmodernity**

Reigning as the dominant moods of Western society during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, modernity, followed by postmodernity exerted a fundamental influence over the culture and literature of the period. Whether writers choose to commit to the principles of one movement, or freely navigate the unclassified conceptual ground between the two ideological boundaries, the concepts of modernism and postmodernism emerge in literary depictions of identity, the discourse of nationality, and the existence of a singular truth. As with all stylistic eras, there is not a specific date marking the end of modernity and the subsequent beginning of postmodernity, however the period near the end of World War II is normally regarded as the transitional boundary, as noted by Irving Howe who writes of the merging movement from modernity to postmodernity. Representing a momentous yet intangible shift in social perspective, and signifying the end of what Howe described as “one of those recurrent periods of cultural unrest, innovation and excitement that we called the ‘modern’”<sup>19</sup> (192), and the beginning of an era marked by both greater uncertainty and increased artistic freedom, this was a time when modernity and postmodernity appeared to spawn their respective cultural products, modernism and postmodernism, simultaneously. The separation of modernity as a temporal

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<sup>19</sup> Irving Howe, *Decline of the New*. 1970. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World)

process from the modernist ‘cultural product’ performs a critical academic function, as this distinction allows a specific critique of the modernist-postmodernist culture independently of a sociological/historical study of the society which produced it. Jochen Schulte-Sasse emphasises this distinction in his article, ‘Introduction: Modernity and Modernism, Postmodernity and Postmodernism: Framing the Issue’,<sup>20</sup> in which he seeks to define ‘modernity’ independently of ‘modernism’ (and the same for ‘postmodernity’ and ‘postmodernism’). The division, he asserts, of ‘the social’ from ‘the cultural’ means that modernity (as an overall mood of society), and the culture of modernism (which derives from such a society), are different entities, and must be examined as such. Thus, Schulte-Sasse regards modernity as “a form of society or social organization characterized by industrialization, so-called high capitalism, etc.”, the origins of which can be located in “the eighteenth century and its culmination in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (6), and which stands separately from “the *cultural* precipitates of this socio-historical period” (6), that is, modernism. Thus the term ‘postmodernity’ represents the “mode of material reproduction of society that has succeeded the period of modernity” (6), while ‘postmodernism’ refers “solely to the mode of cultural reproduction of that socio-historical period” (6). Schulte-Sasse is unconcerned by the varying uses and inflections of these terms, “as long as it is understood that postmodernity and postmodernism refer to qualitative changes in society and their cultural manifestations” (6), respectively. This thesis aims, primarily, to examine the

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<sup>20</sup>Jochen Schulte-Sasse. ‘Introduction: Modernity and Modernism, Postmodernity and Postmodernism: Framing the Issue.’ *Cultural Critique*, No. 5, Modernity and Modernism, Postmodernity and Postmodernism. Winter 1986-1987. Pp 5-22.

literary expression of the modern-postmodern tension within *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*, rather than the social events which spawned the progression onwards from modernity. However, the contrasting depiction of this tension within the two novels does stem from the diverging period in which each text is set. Therefore, the variation in the societal mood during *The English Patient*'s setting in 1944, as opposed to that of *Anil's Ghost* in 2000, is critical in explaining the juxtaposition between the novels, and shall be briefly explored in the concluding chapter.

### **Modernity, Postmodernity and Literature: The Shaping of Critical Analysis**

The modernist-postmodernist spectrum encompasses a diverse theoretical range in critical analysis, from a position of conservative relativity to an extreme stance denying the existence of any static truth, authenticity, or identity. Emerging partly as a catalytic reaction to the concepts of the movement that directly preceded it, the advent of postmodernism owes much to the previous modernist canon, therefore to form a lucid image of what the postmodern ideology *is*, one must first define what postmodernism is *not*. Placing emphasis upon the value of order and holding complete faith in the perfectibility of humanity through knowledge and judicious planning, modernity idealized a hegemonic society that classified a singular, accurate discourse, while seeking future improvement through the perpetual pursuit of progress. Applied to the field of literature, this belief in singularity and progression subsequently created the two predominant assumptions of modernism; firstly, that literature possesses an innate ability to

'progress', demanding writers aspire to become 'perpetual pioneers' focused upon the ceaseless development of innovative, original and unprecedented ideas, since to repeat or reinterpret elements of previous literature is inherently erroneous. Secondly, this vision suggested that the key to maintaining such progress lies in a strict focus upon essential characteristics, meaning that different forms within a discipline would solely concentrate on themselves, with no interaction between literature and theatre, for example.

These assumptions permeated the cultural mood through literature, as modernist writers adopted a similarly regimented rigidity of purpose and definition, and assumed the rigorous quest to progress and find new answers to existing issues of humanity. Thus, modernism also holds a suitably resolute belief in the existence of a static and unique authentic identity, rejecting any form of identity hybridization or alteration, regardless of incremental experience. Such a static approach may initially appear to conflict with the ideology's focus upon progression, but ultimately proves cohesive as these unrelenting societal 'solutions' rely heavily upon the assumption that all variables relating to the problems of humanity remain stable while the answer is obtained, hence the assumption of inert identity and singularity in truth, memory and narrative authenticity.

In stark contrast to the defined developmental goals of modernity, postmodernity flippantly brands such an absolutist search futile, by denying the very existence of the 'new ideas' modernity so fervently seeks. Characteristically preoccupied with dissecting the concept of singularity, postmodernity abjectly

denies the existence of an unadulterated viewpoint or a unique version of absolute truth and identity, rejecting all ‘fixed’ texts, and therefore eliminating the possibility of a singularly superior discourse. However, although it initially appears counterintuitive, it is precisely postmodernity’s abject disagreement with the traditional framework of modernity which ultimately forms the foundation of the modernist-postmodernist fluidity in twentieth-century literature, as this divergence *enables* the conceptual oscillation which characterizes writing of this period. Thus, as noted by Lloyd Spencer<sup>21</sup>, although postmodernism is so “thoroughly imbued with the spirit of dissent...by constantly striking an attitude of dissent, postmodernism both declares its difference...and accentuates the attitude which it shares with its predecessor” (161), thus, postmodernism allows writers the flexibility and freedom to flit between the contrasting ideologies, since, after all, as Spencer remarks, “postmodernism is always having it both ways” (161).

Jean-François Lyotard’s 1979 text, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*<sup>22</sup> remains central to the debate regarding the role of modernity versus postmodernity in the twentieth century, outlining the discourses of legitimization modernity employs to validate its existence, and presenting postmodernity as a rejection of these discourses. Lyotard explores how modernity authorizes its outlook by appealing to what he terms “some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the

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<sup>21</sup> Spencer, Lloyd. ‘Postmodernism, Modernism, and The Tradition of Dissent’. *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, Edited by Stuart Sim. Routledge 1998. Pp 158-173.

<sup>22</sup> *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by Jean-François Lyotard. Trans: Geoff Bennington: Brian Massumi. (page citations within *The Postmodern Reader*, edited by Keith Jenkins)

rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth” (36), using these principles as assurances that modernity is the sole key to progress. These underlying tenets provide a response to all doubts regarding the unassailability of modernity, fueling the authority of organized social institutions (in the name of justice) (36) and validating all fields of research – particularly scientific study – by way of the “Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end – universal peace” (36). However, *Poetics Today* also notes how modernism’s complete faith in science again highlights the interdependent complexity of the modernist-postmodernist tension, as although the modernist ‘certainty’ of scientific research negates the validity of the postmodern subjectivity of a narrative account, this also demonstrates a paradoxical, interlinked hypocrisy, as modernist “scientific knowledge contemptuously excludes ‘prescientific’ narrative knowledge; yet, ironically, narrative knowledge returns from the moment that science requires legitimization, for legitimization of scientific knowledge has typically taken the form of *metanarratives*”<sup>23</sup> (*Poetics Today*, 886).

Exploring the reflexive element which sees postmodernity frequently refer ‘back’ to aspects of modernity, Lyotard offers a simplified definition of postmodernity as an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’, thus the blurred boundary of the two ideologies means postmodernity in fact relies on the rejection of the inherent principles, or ‘grand narratives’, of modernity. This hybridised interdependency within a wider frame of opposition epitomizes the modernity-postmodernity conflict, expressing the ontological differences between the two

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<sup>23</sup> *Poetics Today*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Representation in Modern Fiction, (1984). P. 886.

outlooks as a malleable divide across which artists frequently advance and retreat.

Niels Brügger<sup>24</sup> compresses Lyotard's research in this area into a handful of key elements, the first of which is a limitation of the parameters of his study.

Confining his evaluation of the change and development of knowledge to the most 'developed' countries of the period, Lyotard focuses particularly upon how different forms of knowledge attain and maintain legitimacy within these societies. Brügger summarises the second key point as the acceptance that the current (1979) condition of knowledge is 'postmodern', meaning the present level of knowledge is placed "in the perspective of the philosophy of history, according to which the modern epoch is considered to be over and is superseded by a postmodern epoch" (Brügger, 78).

### **Modernity, Postmodernity, and their Contemporary Interpretations**

Significantly, in Lyotard's work the term 'postmodern' is not employed the way it often is within contemporary criticism – seemingly as a ubiquitous term to describe an eclectic, indistinct quality – but, Brügger notes, instead "serves as a point of departure, refined to address the question of the crisis of the narratives of legitimization in the modern" (78). Therefore, Lyotard uses 'postmodern' to signify the progression onwards from modernist endeavour, which characteristically involved science and institutional power, yet he also continues to emphasize how the two realms remain mutually intertwined, stressing that the postmodern is "undoubtedly a part of the modern....A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in

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<sup>24</sup> 'What about the Postmodern? The Concept of the Postmodern in the Work of Lyotard.' Jean-François Lyotard; Niels Brügger. *Yale French Studies*, No. 99, Jean-François Lyotard: Time and Judgment (2001). Pp 77-92.

the nascent state, and this state is constant” (Lyotard, 41). Modernism’s link to science is critical to this modernist-postmodernist tension, as scientific study propagates the ordered and assumed knowledge against which the postmodern struggles, with what William A. Covino<sup>25</sup> describes as a “terror enforced by the traditional insistence that knowledge is a unity” (402). The modernist reliance on “science (which is concerned with truth) and...the institutions controlling social bonds (which are concerned with justice)” is an attempt “to legitimate their activities with reference to a grand narrative” (Brügger, 78). However, the integrity of these noble-sounding guidelines is somewhat damaged by a postmodern interpretation, as noted by Covino, who views the appeal to emancipation as “a more-or-less disguised appeal for well-behaved and efficient workers” (402); thus, the modernist canons become merely manipulative methods with which to attain validated power. Therefore, the amorphous ‘postmodern’ arises, according to Brügger, when the foundations of these ‘grand narratives’ are unsettled and “become untrustworthy; indeed, the postmodern context *is* this untrustworthiness” (Brügger, 78).

The shaky authority of modernity exposed when the vital components of the grand narratives – “its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal” (Lyotard, 37) – are diluted by the emergence of “clouds of narrative elements” (37), undermines the apparent homogeneity of modernity by expressing the divergent will of specific groups within society. Although proponents of

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<sup>25</sup> Covino, William A. ‘Review [Untitled]’, of *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by Jean-Francois Lyotard, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Foreword by Frederick Jameson, University of Minnesota Press, 1984. In *Rhetoric Review*, Vol.7, No.2, (Spring, 1989). Pp 401-405.

modernity will predictably endeavour to organize these ‘clouds’ into a set of logical matrices in order to regain a consistent social mandate, Lyotard views such attempts as futile and instead, Victor Vitanza<sup>26</sup> notes, appears to celebrate a disruptive postmodern culture that would “create, detonate, and exploit...ambiguities” (55), with fragments of cohesion only occurring when common elements coincidentally combine to form “institutions in patches – local determinism” (Lyotard, 37). In addition to the ‘grand narratives’ which modernity uses to rule general society, Brügger notes three specific legitimating techniques which exist *within* the realm of science, namely the principles of “performativity (that all elements are commensurable, and seeking enhanced efficiency) consensus (through open discussion) and paralogy (disagreement, incommensurableness, innovativeness), which Lyotard himself wishes to promote” (79). Therefore, Covino notes, Lyotard’s report acts as a warning against the blind acceptance of modernist reasoning, and “demands our alertness to the dominance of performativity and to the dangers of consensus, and does so in the name of “the idea and practice of justice”,<sup>27</sup> (404).

The theories of performativity, consensus, and paralogy which underpin modernity’s belief in the conforming power of science, give rise to what Brügger identifies as Lyotard’s critical question; does society require a standardized consensus to attain legitimacy, or can heterogeneous difference create a functioning culture, thus legitimating “the *social bond* on the basis of paralogy and disagreement, dissensus” (Brügger, 79) and allowing what Lyotard describes

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<sup>26</sup> Vitanza, Victor J. ‘Critical Sub/Versions of the History of Philosophical Rhetoric’, in *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn 1987). Pp 41-66.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, ‘The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge’, P. 66.

as “a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown”? (Lyotard, 67). The modernist-postmodernist tension currently exerting such force in twentieth century literature would suggest the solution is not so binary, allowing the discord of these two simultaneously existing societal influences to create a hybridized culture which empowers each individual to make a blended ideological choice. This requires an acknowledgment of what A. Fuat Firat, N. Dholakia and A. Venkatesh<sup>28</sup> describe as “the possibilities and potential alternatives that modern technologies have created on the one hand, and the cynicism and frustrations resulting from the crumbling modern experience on the other hand” (2), constructing an appreciation of how culture reflects aspects of both ideologies, and thus spawning literature’s ‘modern-postmodern tension’.

### **‘The Tidal Pull’: Literary Manifestations of the Modern-Postmodern Tension**

Despite their polar positions, the demarcation of modernism and postmodernism in literature is often imprecise and twisting due to the tension described above, and the ambiguity and self-reflexivity inherent in the latter, which creates a hazy border frequently criss-crossed within a single composition by writers concurrently drawn to elements of both ideologies. A parallel consciousness of the principles of both modernity and postmodernity generates a complex literary duality, as authors jaded by the restrictions of modernity express a resonance with the ambiguity and freedom of postmodernity, while concomitantly returning to the certainty of modernity when that ambiguity

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28 A. Fuat Firat, Nikhilesh Dholakia, Alledi Venkatesh, ‘Conceptual Paper’, European Journal of Marketing, Vol. 29, No. 1, 1995. Pp 40-56.

descends into confused chaos. This produces a rebounding tension between the two viewpoints, creating a type of ideological ‘tidal pull’ that gives the sensation of a simultaneous cultural movement in opposing directions, as artists both embrace the fluidity of postmodernism and withdraw to the relative order of the modernist dogma. In his 1994 article, Wayne Gabardi<sup>29</sup> concisely conveys the spirit of this modernist-postmodernist tension as an internal struggle between the alluring safety of the rigid ideals of modernity, with its lofty aspirations of “critical rationality and human emancipation” (769), and the unexplored freedom of postmodernity’s deconstructed, non-directional approach. Such a straightforward description perhaps belies the ferocious and complex origins of a debate which, David J. Herman<sup>30</sup> notes, views modernism as either “(1) the genuinely emancipatory cultural movement to which postmodernism is but a parasitical and reactionary successor, or as (2) a germ of liberation whose outworn husk it took the radical energies of postmodernism to strip away at last” (55).

The modernist-postmodernist argument manifests in a diverse range of literary elements, influencing science, language, the body, human identity, and the concept of private and public space (Gabardi, 769), yet the basic points of the argument remain unchanged; that is, a modernist literary perspective seeks and presents defined answers to conceptual questions by tidily separating cultural and

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<sup>29</sup> Gabardi, Wayne. ‘Review: The Philosophical Politics of the Modern-Postmodern Debate’ Reviewed work(s): *Between Freiburg and Frankfurt: Toward a Critical Ontology* by Fred Dallmayr, *Political Theory and Postmodernism* by Stephen K. White, and *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* by Richard J. Bernstein. *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Sep., 1994), pp. 769-778 Published by Sage Publications, Inc., on behalf of The University of Utah.

<sup>30</sup> Herman, David J. ‘Modernism versus Postmodernism: Towards an Analytic Distinction.’ *Poetics Today*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring, 1991). Pp 55-86.

societal spheres, while a postmodernist refutes the existence of such concrete deductions and therefore instead conveys a hybridized ‘non-answer’, accepting the lack of absolute conclusions and therefore exploring the issue with the prior knowledge that such modernist answers are inherently unattainable. However, as outlined above, although modernism and postmodernism in their unadulterated forms seem mutually exclusive, the literary tendency to ricochet between the two stems from the inherent paradox of reactionary ideology, as noted by Lloyd Spencer, who stresses that “it should not be forgotten that there were reactionary modernisms as well as progressive...if modernism implies enthusiasm about some aspects of modernity, it was usually accompanied – in the same writers, in the same works – by despair at other aspects of modernity” (159). It is this malleable element of humanity which creates the opposition, defiance, rejection, and hybridized cross-pollination of concepts and representations which characterizes the modernist-postmodernist tension, as writers like Michael Ondaatje swerve between the extremes in search of a feasible ideological representation of twentieth century identity, nationality and truth.

Reducing the debate over the relationship between modernism and postmodernism to a mere oppositional dichotomy risks obscuring the complexities of the mutual tension that exists between the two stances, presenting an over-simplified image of duality when, as Zygmunt Bauman<sup>31</sup> suggests, a more astute evaluation sees literature accepting and embracing this ambiguity rather

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<sup>31</sup> Cited by Lloyd Spencer, in *Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. Pp 163-164.. Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Postmodernity and Intellectuals* (1987), *Freedom*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), *Thinking Sociologically* (1990), *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), *Life in Fragments* (1995), *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (1997).

than continuously attempting to eradicate it. The dynamic divide of modernism and postmodernism in literature derives from each author's approach to the fragmented elements of twentieth century society, and his or her choice to represent disunity as a blow to the stability of humanity or as merely an evolving diversification of society, frequently alternating between the two within a single piece of work. Much of this literary friction revolves around the representation of a person's altering 'subject position' within the narrative, Fuat Firat, Dholakia and Venkatesh note, as the unsettling of "the revered subject of the modernist narrative" means that a central figure is "no longer one but multiple and changeable according to the situation he encounters" (3). By comparison, this decentring effect, which destabilizes the modernist narrative figure, represents freedom for the postmodernist figure, as the "ability to... (re)present different (self-)images in fragmented moments liberates one...from conformity to a single image" (3). Thus, the modern-postmodern tension in literature acknowledges and assimilates these two positions, allowing paradoxical and inconsistent behaviour that enables characters to act as humanity realistically does, which in turn points to an amalgamated blend of modernist and postmodernist sensibilities.

### **The Modern-Postmodern Tension in *The English Patient* and *Anil's***

#### ***Ghost***

The juxtaposition between the representation of the modern-postmodern tension in *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* originates from the contrasting societal times in which each novel is set. Although both novels express aspects of the modern and postmodern through imagery, the difference in how each portrays

the ideological divide links the novel to their respective setting. Suggesting a sense of the safe redemption accessible through definitions, accentuating narrative incoherence, and granting balanced validity to differences and similarities, *The English Patient* can be read as reflective of the transitional time in which the story occurs. A feeling that the accepted boundaries of society are shifting and evolving resonates through the novel, capturing the uncertainty that followed the critical historical events which ultimately altered society on a global scale.

Enmeshed in the postmodern, Ondaatje's 1992 and 2000 novels offer a sophisticated view of the manifestation of such tension in areas of identity, nationality and truth, presenting these elements from a vacillating modern and postmodern viewpoint in *The English Patient*, compared with the more clarified contrast offered in *Anil's Ghost*. Addressing what Mike Cole, Dave Hill and Glenn Rikowski<sup>32</sup> refer to as the “two opposing strands of postmodernism, one reactionary, the other progressive” (192), Ondaatje expresses postmodernity as a multi-faceted rejection *and* companion of modernity, encompassing the reactionary postmodernism Patti Lather<sup>33</sup> described as “concerned with the collapse of meaning, with nihilism and cynicism” in addition to resistance postmodernism, which advocates a “non-dualistic and anti-hierarchical” society celebrating “difference without opposition” and personal autonomy. While *The English Patient* evokes [a message of] mingled ideology, allowing characters to create an individual version of the ‘non-dualistic’ position Lather describes, *Anil's*

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<sup>32</sup> Cole, Mike, Hill, Dave, Rikowski, Glenn. ‘Between Postmodernism and Nowhere: The Predicament of the Postmodernist.’ *British Journal of Educational Studies* Vol. 45, No.2, (June 1997). Pp 187-200.

<sup>33</sup> Lather, Patti. *Getting Smart: feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. Routledge, 1991. Cited by Cole, Hill and Rikowski, above.

*Ghost* suggests such duality is very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. This conveys the contrasting and complex nature of the modern-postmodern tension: the former uses imagery to express elements of modernity, then of postmodernity, before vaguely settling upon a hybridised outlook. This sentiment reflects the transitional period in which *The English Patient* is set, in comparison to that of *Anil's Ghost*, which occupies a more mixed Western era but a more separated global situation. Although Western society was itself enmeshed in the postmodern by 2000, the total social picture was – depressingly – much clearer: the divide between the West and the East, the developed and developing, the empowered and overlooked was more entrenched by 2000 than in the vacuum following the end of World War II, a division captured by the comparatively resolved, binary conclusion of *Anil's Ghost*.

While the disrupted narrative style of *The English Patient* suggests an atmosphere of heightened instability and ambiguity similar to that of *Anil's Ghost*, the former novel's expression takes a comparatively haphazard tone. In conveying the complexity of characters seeking a sense of postmodernist oblivion and modernist assurance within the milieu of warfare, *The English Patient* allows these realms to merge and corrupt, whereas *Anil's Ghost* instead offers boundaries and clear juxtapositions. The deviations of *The English Patient* painstakingly reveal mere shards of insight within a chaotic blend of past recollections and present observations, assimilating these threads into a quilted product of questionable integrity that Amy Novak<sup>34</sup> describes as merely “isolated details

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<sup>34</sup> Novak, Amy. ‘Textual Hauntings: Narrating History, Memory and Silence in *The English Patient*’. *Studies in the Novel*, Volume 36, number 2, Summer 2004. Pp 206-231.

yoked together” (208). Compounding the confusion of the novel’s disordered discourse is an unreliable temporal appropriation that “translates the events of the past into an image in the present” (208), and overlaps experience to create a sense of discontinuity and uncertain reality. Such a layered narrative, Beverley Curran<sup>35</sup> notes, renders the ‘unbiased truth’ virtually indiscernible from selective recollection since “Ondaatje’s application of translation to the narrative...means that, at the story’s heart there is a deferment, for a translation is never definitive” (17). This provides a suitably unsettled environment for the novel’s ambiguous ideological alliances, with its characters choosing a combined outlook after swinging incessantly between classic modernism and anarchic postmodernism. This pendulum conveys the disorientating quest for the secure singularity offered by the modernist ‘West’ and the blended options of the postmodernist ‘East’, placing the scientific exactness of cartography and forensic investigation adjacent to fluid images of bewildering and dynamic foreign landscapes to link assurance, definition and Western society with modernism, and position this in contrast to the unknown, ambiguous un-bordered terrain of the postmodernist East.

### **Modernity, Postmodernity and *The English Patient***

Emanating an atmosphere of omnipresent ambiguity at the close of World War II, *The English Patient* expresses a beguiling air of pervading uncertainty and fleeting assurances, depicting these alternating uncertainties and convictions, in particular, through Hana, David Caravaggio, Count Ladislaus de Almásy (also

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<sup>35</sup> Curran, Beverley. ‘Ondaatje’s The E.P and Altered States of Narrative’. In Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven, *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje’s Writing*, West Lafayette, 2005. Pp 6-15.

known as the English patient) and Kirpal Singh. This thesis shall focus upon the latter two members of this multi-national group, haphazardly thrown together in an Italian Villa. The constant mood of imminent danger creates a taut atmosphere, which is emphasised by the repeated references to fractures, gaps, and omitted details that Rufus Cook<sup>36</sup> refers to as the “discontinuous quality of human perception” (109). Noting that although “it is certainly true of his narrative that it offers some of the most effective examples available of characteristic postmodern ‘slippages’ and ‘shifts’”(110), Cook nonetheless concedes that despite the novel’s deliberate disregard for “distinctions of time and place and linear progression” (110) there also exists a vital sense of connective naming and landscape imagery reminiscent of a modernist outlook, with the inclusions of bridge, door and window references to suggest the characters’ desire to “impose unity or community on their experience” (112). These double-edged images Cook refers to suggest a desire for the freedom to lead a self-defined postmodernist existence, while retaining the sense of connection offered by a modernist social order. This duality emerges through *The English Patient*‘s concurrent preoccupation with factual, scientific endeavour and categorical names as modernist metaphors, illustrated by the repeated desert mapping and titular references which dominate the English patient’s narrative and recollections of his love affair with Katharine Clifton. Torn between the security of a categorized relationship - a ‘named claim’ rather than scurrilous secrecy - and the potential suffocation of such definition, Almásy’s painful negotiation of the modern-postmodern middle-ground is

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<sup>36</sup>Cook, Rufus. “Imploding Time and Geography”: Narrative Compressions in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*” The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, Volume 33, Number 2, 1998.

expressed through a conflict between possessiveness and vague musing. This poses his instinctual ownership – “this is my shoulder, he thinks, not her husband’s, this is my shoulder” (*The English Patient*, 166) – in stark contrast to his awareness that such tenure through names can rapidly become a dangerous prism, as Almásy reflects upon Katharine’s love of defined terms: “words gave her clarity, brought reason, shape. Whereas I thought words bent emotion like sticks in water” (253). Through this concurrent yearning for both the modernist control of names and cartographical knowledge, and for the shelter of the postmodernist anonymity of the desert, the novel projects a potent representation of the modern-postmodern tension. Contrasting the patient’s “tendency to leap unpredictably from one place or period (or persona) to another” (Cook, 114) against his modernist methodical ability to identify any town simply from “its skeletal shape on a map” (19), *The English Patient* soon diverges yet again to depict Almásy’s ardent postmodern defiance of attempts to classify his identity according to nationality or naming.

The concepts of nationality and identity are intertwining mutual determinants in *The English Patient*’s representation of the identity progression of Kirpal Singh and Almásy. The novel’s portrayal of the connection and eventual dissension between the two men expresses the conflict between the homogenizing modernist influence of the West and the evolving postmodern autonomy of the East. This discord embodies what Robert Young<sup>37</sup> regards as the source of the modern-postmodern tension, a binary divergence which originated during the

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<sup>37</sup> Young, Robert. ‘White mythologies: writing History and the West’. In *The Postmodern History Reader*, edited by Keith Jenkins, Routledge 1997. Pp 75-76

period of “simultaneous globalization of Western culture and the re-empowerment of non-Western states” (75) around the time of World War II. Although *The English Patient* maintains a predominantly diplomatic, balanced stance towards this relationship for most of the novel, its sudden reversal of character positions towards the conclusion resonates with Young’s hypothesis of the rise of postmodern autonomy over identity. The novel’s narrative swerve represents this, conveying what Shannon Smyrl<sup>38</sup> regards as Almásy’s postmodernist quest to avoid a “singular identity definitive of the new decentralizing global culture” (301), before overruling such Western dominance by conveying Kirpal’s abrupt realization that he has not found an authentic identity on a “fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world” (301). This transitional mood also underpins *The English Patient*’s deliberately vague portrayal of Almásy, presenting him as part of an unclear, winding narrative which, Stephanie M. Hilger<sup>39</sup> notes, allows the English patient to “hover on the dividing line between the civilized and the barbarian” (41), as “his presence undermines any rigidly established barrier between these two terms” (41). Almásy therefore assumes the ideological sentiment of the era, offering a complacent denial of the oppressive element Western modernism exerts over the Eastern identity by conveniently locating “the possibility of self-determination outside the

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<sup>38</sup> Smyrl, Shannon. ‘The Nation as “International Bastard”: Ethnicity and Language in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*’, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Volume 28, Number 2, 2003. Pp 9-38.

<sup>39</sup> Hilger, Stephanie M. ‘Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* and Rewriting History’ in Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven’s *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje’s Writing*, West Lafayette, 2005. Pp 38-49.

realm of determinate meaning...”, effectively demurring definitions so that all categories merely lie “within the mirage of language itself, the only invention – the only identity – is that of pure difference” (Smyrl, 11). This conveys a dramatic modification, and moderation, of the explicit modernist sentiments originally expressed by Kirpal, when he first entered the West as a young Sikh bomb-defusal specialist within the prejudiced British army.

The uneasiness which the novel suggests both Almásy and Kirpal feel as a result of their inauthentic identities represents an initial bonding point, as “the differences between his and Kip’s experiences become insignificant in this assertion of shared identity characterized by difference” (Smyrl, 10), but ultimately leads to a divergence after Hiroshima, when Almásy’s status as a Westerner – despite his refusal to acknowledge a specific nationality – marks him as an enemy in Kip’s disillusioned mind. Through the layered bond of Kirpal and Almásy’s relationship, the novel expresses how this apprehensive friendship operates on both a base, personal level and a globalised, ideological, abstract plane, the latter of which ultimately marks the end of their compatibility in any form. On a miniature scale, Susan Ellis<sup>40</sup> regards the pre-Hiroshima relationship as a sign that the novel has moved onwards from what she describes as Ondaatje’s previous valorization of the “masculinist qualities of separateness, individualism, and distance from others” (23), using the initial connection of these disparate characters through a common lack of concrete national identity to emphasize a

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<sup>40</sup> Ellis, Susan. ‘Trade and Power, Money and War: Rethinking Masculinity in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*.’ *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Volume 21.2 1996. Pp. 22-36.

united form of postmodernism which depicted a “connectedness of central characters with, rather than their separation from, other people” (23). On a wider stage, however, the delicate allegiance between Kirpal and Almásy becomes symbolic of the divisive nature of global politics, as this initial comfortable alliance between two assigned and assumed identities is destroyed when the broader interactions of national war strategies force Kip to recognize his status within this struggle, and acknowledge the importance of actively choice rather than passive acceptance. This dual aspect – expressing the security of entrenched nationhood and the freedom to choose or discard a nationality and its associated identity at will – infuses the novel’s expression of the modern-postmodern facets of nationality and identity, exploring the slow-burning postmodernist uncertainty, followed by outrage, of Kirpal that results in a modernist reconciliation with elements of his original nationality. Posing the struggle to attain an autonomously elected hybridised identity alongside the ease with which Almásy rejects the modernist national boundaries favoured by the West<sup>41</sup>, the novel emphasises how a Westerner’s privilege to select a postmodern identity contrasts with the Eastern experience, highlighting two versions of modern-postmodern mingling by juxtaposing a chosen, mixed identity against a restricted, assigned identity imposed under imperial rule.

The ability to simply select and assume an identity comprises a fundamental element of *The English Patient*’s representation of the modern-postmodern tension, an aspect that also emerges in *Anil’s Ghost*’s treatment of

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<sup>41</sup> Explored with respect to the disillusioned impact of such arbitrary national divides upon his explorer colleague, Madox

names and ownership as contributing factors to identity. The common thread of naming imagery reflects an ideological preoccupation with the power of categorized identity in the two novels, offering a modernist compression of human complexities down to a singular, defined term, while postmodernists alternately wish to expand and embrace the myriad of differences without definitions. This naming imagery assumes a divergent quality in each novel, however, as the characters of *The English Patient* strive to name a deadened shell of a man, perhaps in order to validate and re-activate their own sense of vitality, while in *Anil's Ghost*, the living actively consume themselves with naming one dead man to resurrect the honour of the countless dead. Though both novels convey a sense of the intimate ambiguity between the living and the dead, this division is more pronounced in *Anil's Ghost*, where the objective and outcome of attaining a name is definitively stated from the outset. By contrast, the English patient's lingering quasi-existence maintains a mood of languishment in the Villa, the only possible alleviation of which may lie in uncovering the truth of his name. This pursuit of a named identity for the English patient exemplifies what Carrie Dawson<sup>42</sup> regards as the modern-postmodern conflict of the appeal of categories, since, although the characters initially use postmodern uncertainty as an opportunity to "project a variety of identities onto his unrecognizable body, reconstituting him into the image of their loved ones and adversaries" (50), they ultimately seek a confession and name in order to "affirm the possibility of an

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<sup>42</sup> Dawson, Carrie. 'Calling People Names: Reading Imposture, Confession, and Testimony in and after Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*.' *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2000. Pp 50-73.

integrated “properly” identified subject” through naming, as this will “allow them to reconceive of themselves as such” (50). Dawson’s suggestion that Hana’s, Kip’s and Caravaggio’s efforts to name the English patient stem from a modernist wish to definitively re-name themselves and constitutes a sign that although they perhaps no longer recognise the authority of a nation, the power of a name endures. This sentiment emerges more transparently in *Anil’s Ghost*’s forensic investigation of an unknown corpse (referred to for much of the book as ‘Sailor’), where a sole victim’s name becomes recompense for the crimes of a Government which now leads in name only, having lost all integrity as a protector. Thus, *The English Patient*’s characters’ binary desire to find assurance in categorical facts while remaining undefined themselves does resonate with *Anil’s Ghost*, but the latter offers a much more transparent sense of motive and consequence. While the former novel employs naming imagery to express the tension of the dual desire for security without generalised definition, and factual classification without the associated personal restrictions, *Anil’s Ghost* reflects the Western-Eastern divide of its temporal setting, emphasising the power of names and the crucial importance of definitively attributing one murder victim to Sri Lankan government actions.

### **Modernity, Postmodernity and *Anil’s Ghost***

*Anil’s Ghost* conveys the modern-postmodern tension of identity, nationality, and truth within a Sri Lankan environment of cultural disintegration, random violence, and utterly transitory safety. The novel aligns the Western world with the assurances of modernist scientific knowledge, definitions, and

established names, contrasting this against the chaotic blur of an Eastern nation which, despite a traditional family order, holds postmodernist connotations of uncertainty and malleability. This extreme juxtaposition suggests the novel's skepticism about the existence of an integrated globalised identity that seamlessly merges the West and East within a single person, instead emphasising how the two realms clash, overlap, yet remain inherently independent. These themes emerge predominantly in the character of Anil Tissera, a young forensic scientist born in Sri Lanka, but educated in the West. Anil's thorough adoption of modernist values and immersion in Western culture therefore make her a lightning rod for the collision of modern and postmodern perspectives when she reluctantly returns to Sri Lanka to shed the light of forensic definitions upon the fractured victims of the civil war which continues to plague the nation. The novel portrays Anil as the unwittingly representative of Western ignorance and arrogance, quickly attracting the vitriol of Sri Lankan experts and emphasising the ideological contrast through her attempts to impose incongruous modernist assumptions of safety and free knowledge upon a postmodernist society. The novel conveys how this lack of awareness engenders an air of Western superiority that usurps domestic discourse, exposing the naive nature of Anil's modernist suppositions and offering a clear juxtaposition between Western and Eastern concepts of truth, identity, and national autonomy. The modernist order to which Anil is now accustomed jars with the postmodernity of Sri Lankan society, a threatened existence emphasised with the deliberately disordered backdrop of a disrupted temporal narrative littered with what Margaret Scanlan<sup>43</sup> describes as

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<sup>43</sup> Scanlan, Margaret. 'Anil's Ghost and Terrorism's Time'. *Studies in the Novel*, Fall 2004, Vol.

characterised by “those abrupt breaks in time that Ursula Heise calls ‘chronoschisms’, ruptures that postmodern novelists, unlike their modern predecessors, refuse to assimilate...” (Scanlan, 303). “The chronoschisms of *Anil’s Ghost*”, Scanlan notes, “create a sense of time experienced through terror, by people living in fear that they can be blown away in an instant, to whom historical perspective is an alien luxury” (303), thus casting a postmodern pallor over Sri Lanka which stands in sharp contrast to Anil’s ideals of modernist order and certainty.

Although an apparent loner in both the Western culture and that of her birthplace, the novel infuses Anil’s expatriate return after fifteen years in the West with an air of defined dislocation, emphasising her alienation from the East by way of contrasting modernist and postmodernist landscapes, and through Anil’s modernist scientific mission, which remains at extreme odds with the hybridised nature of her birth nation, a personal background that Victoria Cook<sup>44</sup> refers to as an incorporation of “the contradictions and paradoxes that are displayed in human and cultural diversity” (7). Employed in a heavily modernist endeavour – as a forensic anthropologist working for a UN-affiliated human right organization – Anil investigates, along with local archaeologist Sarath Diyasena, what appears to be a Government killing when a recently buried body is discovered in ancient burial grounds accessible only to Government officials. The novel presents Anil’s

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36, Issue 3. Pp 302-317.

<sup>44</sup>Cook, Victoria. ‘Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*’. In Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven’s *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje’s Writing*, West Lafayette, 2005. Pp 6-16.

childhood as a clear navigation of the alternate values offered by the modern and postmodern: having autonomously purchased a male name and heritage from her brother early in life as a result of a hazily-described deal, Anil is seemingly determined to attain professional acclaim while rebuking the personal attention her swimming success brings, a woman intent upon uncovering modernist truths in a postmodernist environment. Although Anil does possess a degree of the multi-faceted identity produced by such a fractured mosaic of global influences – something of an inevitability in Ondaatje's novels, as noted by Cook, who comments that “for Ondaatje, names and identities are not fixed entities, but cultural and ideological constructions” (9) – Anil has enveloped herself for fifteen years in her adopted Western culture, creating a stark juxtaposition between herself and Sarath. The novel thus depicts Anil as a manifestation of Western modernism by portraying her as a culturally ruptured Sri Lankan who initially pined for her home country after leaving for England, who cut all emotional links when she divorced her Sri Lankan husband after a brief and impetuous marriage. While Anil's ex-husband may have, Sandeep Sanghera<sup>45</sup> notes, returned “to Colombo to presumably walk along the very roads they once reminisced”, in contrast, “Anil lets go of those very same roads. He turns to Sri Lanka and she turns away” (84).

The contrasting elements of modernist duty and postmodernist oblivion place Anil's allegiance in the realm of the former, with this juxtaposition further explored through the novel's alternating representations of the Sri Lankan and

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<sup>45</sup> Sandeep, Sanghera. ‘Touching the Language of Citizenship in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*’, in Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven's *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*, West Lafayette, 2005. Pp 83-92.

American landscapes and Anil's experience in each. Although she is a character who "transgresses the conventional notions of identity and boundaries of gender and position" (Cook, 7) during childhood, having reached her adult years, Anil seems most comfortable occupying a named environmental sphere. Thus, having undergone a "multivalent integration of ideologies and cultures that form the fluid whole" (Cook, 7), the novel depicts Anil as deliberately enmeshed in the modernist order of a mapped, defined Western landscape by the time she returns to Sri Lanka. Accustomed to the West's "clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries" (*Anil's Ghost*, 54), Anil is thrown back into the relative turmoil of civil war in the East, where "...she was moving with only one arm of language among uncertain laws and a fear that was everywhere" (54). Thus, the novel offers an image of ordered Western society as the underpinning modernist platform around which the postmodernist Sri Lankan aspects of the novel swirl, creating a palpable tension between the safe confines of modernist definition and the intimidating freedom of postmodernist ambiguity.

The conflict between Western beliefs of truth and nationality, and the postmodernist notions of Anil's birth nation, dominates the novel's representation of the tension between Western and Eastern views of nationality and national autonomy. Posing the underprivileged Sri Lankan war account against history's suppressing modernist singularity, Anil's return emphasises a Western disregard for Eastern suffering and highlights what Brenda Glover<sup>46</sup> notes is an overdue

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<sup>46</sup> Glover, Brenda. 'Unanchored to the World': Displacement and Alienation in *Anil's Ghost* and the Prose of Michael Ondaatje'. Centre for the Research in the New Literatures in English (CRNLE) Journal, 2000. Pp 75-80.

amplification of the Sri Lankan voice, “whose experience and contributions to documented historical events have been ignored” (75). The disparity between Western observations and the unheard Sri Lankan discourse conveys the underlying modern-postmodern tension of national identity within *Anil’s Ghost*, expressing the complexity of a global divide which seemingly places Western media’s ideas of Sri Lanka above those of the nation itself. The novel places alternating emphasis on the modern and postmodern perspective throughout, offering a segregated but balanced view of the Western-Eastern collision. After a hesitant interconnection between the two realms, Anil does ultimately flee back to the modernist West near the novel’s conclusion. However, the narrative voice does not automatically depart with her. This suggests the text’s acknowledgment of the insurmountable distance which remains between the West and the East in the first year of the twenty-first century, yet an attempt at recompense places the novel’s concluding perspective in the eyes of the Sri Lankans, a small literary victory “for people who are marginalized, disconnected or displaced” (Glover, 76).

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## **Chapter Two**

### **Modernity, Postmodernity, and the Identity of Kirpal Singh**

*“Everything is in a state of flux, including the status quo”*

(Robert Byrne)

*The English Patient’s* ambiguous representation of the modern-postmodern tension relies greatly upon its characters, firstly to symbolise the opposing ideological elements, and secondly, to create an amalgamated sense of modern-postmodern fusion via their self-reflexive, mutually affecting interactions in the Villa San Girolamo. This inter-relatedness is reflected in Susan Ellis’s<sup>47</sup> comment that “the dying English patient is not permitted to retreat into silence and isolation” (26), noting these imposed exchanges allow the novel to employ its characters as a significant vehicle for projecting the blended modern-postmodern identity. Since Almásy “has no identity except through his relationships with the others in the villa, particularly with Singh”, Ellis writes, it is only “through them his story, his life and his identity are developed” (26). *The English Patient* can therefore be read as an “attempt by Ondaatje to depict the possibility of the truly differentiated self defined through particular relationships to others, rather than in isolation from them” (26); namely, to use these relationships to allow the

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<sup>47</sup> Ellis, Susan. ‘Trade and Power, Money and War: Rethinking Masculinity in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*’. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1996. Pp 22-36.

emergence of ideologically-mingled identities which express variation, fragile acceptance, hybridisation and irreversible divergence. The intersection and merging of modern and postmodern culture conveyed in *The English Patient* spans three predominant individual interfaces, employing the miniaturised villa interactions of Kirpal Singh and Count Ladislaus de Almásy (also referred to as the English patient), the larger setting of Almásy and Madox's epiphanies and exploration in the desert, and finally the broader interactions of international war strategies – specifically, the bombing of Hiroshima – before zooming back in to the villa to reflect how such dehumanized events dramatically alter the course of each individual's life.

The modern-postmodern tension underpins the representation of nationality and identity in this novel, with the text offering a portrayal of how these alternating ideologies can skew and disrupt an individual, leaving them adrift within an ambiguous zone in which ideals and beliefs are constantly questioned and overturned. Expressed through imagery which reflects the disparity between Western and Eastern viewpoints, this conflict emerges primarily through the characters of Almásy, (and later, his desert companion, Madox), and a young Sikh 'sapper', Kirpal Singh. Through these characters, the novel establishes three distinct ideological perspectives, before dismantling this to depict the destruction of a fragile order, caused when each man experiences a perspective-altering event. Contrasting the postmodern cynicism of Almásy against the modernist idealism of the younger Kirpal, the novel conveys how the latter's belief in modernism's safely defined limitations counters Almásy's

disillusioned rejection of such security in favour of postmodern oblivion. Madox emerges later as the novel's manifestation of British traditionalism, predominantly opposing Almásy's borderless desires before eventually becoming the prime motivating factor for Almásy's utter denial of modernist nationhood. This ordered ideological construction allows the novel to clearly outline the alternating elements of identity formation, before depicting an anarchic progression which destroys the stability of each man's beliefs, abandoning them in an ideological haze. A novel of indistinct motivations and irresolution, *The English Patient* does not offer any definitive judgments regarding the validity of each outlook, instead, simply documenting the varying degree to which each character manages to accept and assimilate these elements of a changing society into their own, hybridised identity.

Set against the milieu of warfare and thorough confusion at the close of World War II, *The English Patient* expresses how the ideological divide represents more than simply the desire for an ordered versus an ambiguous society; in the novel, the concept of 'the modern' versus 'the postmodern' is interchangeable with the ideals of the West and of the East, with bordered terrain and uncharted desert landscapes, and with established imperial power as opposed to colonial oppression. Capturing a sense of the chaotic contemporary warfare which sees blended groups of "English and Americans and Indians and Australians and Canadians advancing north" (*The English Patient*, 73), the novel simultaneously emphasises both the modern and the postmodern elements of the advance by highlighting the postmodern uncertainty of these multi-faceted

groups, while referencing such turmoil within the context of human history. This postmodern turbulence is thus undercut by the novel's emphasis upon the timeless nature of such fighting, noting that although "the last mediaeval war was fought in Italy in 1943 and 1944" (73), this is certainly not the first time that the "armies of new kings" have been "flung carelessly against" the ancient fortress towns "which had been battled over since the eighth century" (73). This contrasting imagery suggests both the cyclical and the unexpected nature of such unrest; simultaneously expressing the established, time-honoured modernity of warfare alongside the bewildering disorientation such conflict creates. Such a concurrent expression of the modern and the postmodern epitomises *The English Patient*'s representation of this tension, as the novel conveys the diverging elements of nationality, identity and truth in an amalgamated form which allows little scope for any definitive ideological resolution. Thus, the novel presents the alternate views as remaining inconclusive both in relation to each other, and themselves; the multiple motivations which characterise the postmodern viewpoint mean personal interactions and removed world events combine to alter individual perspectives, producing a fluctuating sense of identity which opposes and colludes with the closely-defined form of identity rooted in birth origin and culture favoured by modernism. The novel therefore conveys the two ideologies as alternating, overlapping and, to a degree, fusing, to form the blurred and ambiguous representation of the modern-postmodern tension conveyed in *The English Patient*.

The novel shows how the blur of warfare creates an ambiguous cross-over zone of values and viewpoints, with the resulting landscape propelling its three central characters towards a period of fundamental awakening in which each character is forced to evaluate the driving motivations and integrity of their own identity. Within this ideological fog, the novel's early imagery frames Kirpal Singh as the symbol of the oppressed Eastern populations who paradoxically continue to seek the modernist approval of the West. Almásy is the novel's contrasting figure of postmodernist disillusionment, who discards once-trusted borders and defined identities in favour of a harsh, cynical postmodern ambiguity, while Madox originally holds a similar view to that of the early Kirpal before joining Almásy in despair near the novel's end. *The English Patient* vividly conveys the duality of nationality during warfare through these three men, as each seemingly attempts to quash their reservations in the name of the pursuit of an 'authentic' identity, a single-minded quest for an ideal which flounders once its integrity is questioned by the confronting reality of international conflict. The contemporaneous desire to cling to modernist definitions and float within a postmodernist persona manifests within each character's identity, both intellectually and physically: Kirpal is willing to risk his life for a mere "temporary pact between him and the painted fresco's royalty" (75) who represents Western culture and civilisation, despite knowing the West "would forget him, never acknowledge his existence, or be aware of him" (75), and forces himself to "sink claustrophobically into the dough of a mattress" (298) even though "in truth [he'd] never gotten used to the beds of the West" (298).

Similarly, Almásy loudly proclaims his love for the way “the desert could not be claimed nor owned” (147) yet, seemingly, craves a sense of modernist security and demarcation in mapping the landscape, craving the resonance Caravaggio believes Englishmen find in the vast sand hills, as “a part of their brain reflects the desert precisely. So they’re not foreigners there” (35). The collision of these outwardly-stated and inwardly-concealed identities, which each man steadfastly tries to avoid, is forced upon them by external events which compel each to confront their ideological truth, and judge whether their beliefs truly resonate with the reality of their now-altered identity. These revelations result in the shattering of Singh’s modernist aspirations in joining the British army, prompt Madox’s tragic epiphany in a Somerset church, and leave Almásy statically processing the regretful recollections of a life lived in defiance of modernist boundaries.

### **Interlocking in Isolation: The Modern and Postmodern Perspectives of the English patient and Kirpal Singh**

Presenting the varying perspectives of each ideology rather than emphasising the decline of modernism or a rising postmodernist sentiment, *The English Patient* suggests a reflexive, rather than oppositional relationship between the two stances. A paradoxical swinging balance between Kirpal and Almásy suggests the fluctuations between their opposing positions is a movement born of their innate interrelatedness, rather than opposition, and expresses the dynamic alteration of the West-East power balance during the period in which the novel is set. This vacillating interdependency infuses the text’s portrayal of the Western-

Eastern divide at this time, a struggle which, Robert Young<sup>48</sup> has noted, sees the march of Almásy's Western modernism inextricably linked to Kirpal's postmodernist lineage, and vice versa, since "the globalization of Western civilization" at this point was infused and driven by a sense of "self-consciousness of its own cultural relativization" (75). As noted by Ellis, this interdependent connection formed between Almásy and Kip is thus inherently revealing and necessary for unravelling both the identity of the charred patient and for Kirpal's realisation of his true position within a modernist Western society.

This sense of the broad collective versus the vulnerable individual forms an integral element of the text's early representation of the nationality and identity of Kirpal Singh, with *The English Patient* exploring how the modernist community of the British army seeks to assimilate the complex individual into a simplified modernist category. This binary configuration is later disbanded and rebuilt by Kirpal into a modern-postmodern hybridisation of his own choosing, after the bombing of Hiroshima jolts him into recognising the oppressive in-authenticity of an identity founded upon an assigned, group-imposed rather than an individualised, choice. The novel's expression of the pre-Hiroshima modern-postmodern conflict for Kirpal manifests in the form of the dominant British military regime, when his postcolonial status within the army comes to represent a wider view of concepts of institutions versus individuality, community control versus individual autonomy, and Western dominance in the face of Eastern

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<sup>48</sup> Young, Robert. 'White mythologies: writing History and the West'. In *The Postmodern History Reader*, edited by Keith Jenkins. Routledge 1997. Pp 75-76.

passivity. Exploring the role of the modernist community, Elizabeth Kella<sup>49</sup> disrupts the optimistic modernist view of the relationship between the individual and the community, rejecting the traditionally positive connotations of community in favour of examining the total effect, particularly the degrading homogenization such grouping entails. Such a stance constitutes a defiance of entrenched modernist connotations, which base societal order upon such communal categories, as Kella acknowledges; “it is difficult to conceptualize community in negative terms. Negatively portrayed, community largely loses its meaning and becomes something else. When the grounds of commonality are negative traits, community is transformed into an unthinking mob, an unfeeling society...” (50). This sensation of numbers breeding corruption connects with the novel’s personification of the British army as a modernist thug, pigeonholing Kirpal into a lowly-defined category and expecting his gratitude for the mere chance to fight on behalf of the imperial forces. Kella’s analysis of modernist community as an oppressor rather than a support for identity formation thus emanates throughout the novel’s representation of identity during war, posing modernist authority in direct conflict with the desires and autonomy of the postmodern individual. The text’s presentation of nationality as a modernist imposition, and an inherently unstable form of identity, positions Kirpal Singh as the embodiment of the ‘persuaded individual’, suggesting a quietly growing postmodern defiance at this point in the novel. Through Kirpal, the modern-postmodern tension becomes a

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<sup>49</sup> Kella, Elizabeth. *Beloved Communities: Solidarity and Difference in Fiction by Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison, and Joy Kogawa*. Dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English presented at Uppsala University in 2000. Uppsala University, Sweden, 2000.

more personal struggle, with the novel portraying the collision of the abstract and real through his desire to maintain his belief in an idealised notion of nationality, even when this is undermined by the infidelity of the British army. The deceptive integrity challenges Kirpal's models of modernist endeavour and, by contrasting a sense of idealised yet imposed national identity against values asserted independently of national allegiance, suggests how such postmodern individualism could deplete a united, traditional vision of conflict. The disintegration of Kirpal's modernist illusions under the pressure of daily war trauma casts doubt over the validity of social models which promote such regulations, considering how this ultimately provokes a revolt in the previously loyal modernist recruit. The recognition that each member of the group neither entirely belongs nor gains any complete tranquility in their transplanted role devastates the idea of nationality granting an innate sense of purpose to war, a sentiment captured by Kella, who notes that "in *The English Patient*, "nation" and "nationality" are categories of identity that both *become* unsettled and *unsettle* humanist ideas of universality" (81).

In *The English Patient*, the uncertain integrity of national identity emerges when the fundamental worthiness of war dissolves, a simultaneous movement of ideological boundaries which reflects the transitional mood of society during the period in which the novel is set. As the modernist national war ethos clashes irreconcilably with the will of the individual, and the reasons for war no longer validate the demands it places upon society, this interchange takes on new-found significance as the traditional Western-Eastern power imbalance shows signs of

re-alignment. The duplicity of a Western army which drops atomic bombs while claiming a higher degree of civility creates a feeling of betrayal that poses this Eastern citizen against the country he serves, thus the novel embarks upon expressing the altering ideological ratio of Kirpal Singh. The modern-postmodern tension has therefore resulted in what Kella describes as “an emphasis on the individual character and an elaboration on the familiar theme of the individual against society, often understood as the nation. In such work, the individual is valorized and society is criticized” (50). The solace the individual Kirpal seeks within a modernist army rapidly transforms to disillusioned loss when Western nations reveal they are prone to the moral flaws and corruption that afflict all nations. The ‘dual personality’ of nationhood therefore forms the basis of Ondaatje’s ideological illustration of the facets of nationality in *The English Patient*, exploring the eager adoption, accepted inferiority, then explosive outrage of Kirpal which leads to a reconciliation with elements of his original nationality. This transformation is explored in this chapter, alongside Almásy’s defiant rejection of the national boundaries favoured by a modernist Westerner, and the disillusioned impact of such arbitrary divides upon his explorer colleague, Madox, which will be discussed in Chapter Three.

**“Singh. And the ambiguities” (The English Patient, 200):**

**Manifestations of the Modern-Postmodern Tension in the Identity of Kirpal**

**Singh**

Occupying a complex transitional ground in *The English Patient* post-Hiroshima, the character of Kirpal Singh conveys the damaging effects wrought by forcing an inauthentic viewpoint upon oneself, by illustrating the pursuit of a modernist ideal at the expense of a genuine, mixed, postmodern identity. Initially determined to belong within the Western world, Kirpal is conveyed as an individual moving within the spectrum of ideology as the narrative progresses, oscillating between positions of modernist oppression and harmonious freedom within wartime British society. These fluctuations see Kirpal veer from his assumed role of a modernist army Sapper, to his place within the contented security of Lord Suffolk’s bomb disposal team, and back to that of an oppressed soldier before abruptly rejecting the imposed modernist discourse of the West to return to his native India in disgust. The text clearly marks each ideological swerve in Kirpal’s search for genuine identity, expressing an initially postmodern will to find a sense of belonging outside India, the desire to assume an internationally-combined identity isolated from his familial role, the modernism he inadvertently moves towards while in the army, and ultimately the desire to reclaim his Eastern identity in defiance of the Western dominance which skews his life until the occurrence of Hiroshima.

Despite being born into a traditional Indian family in which, as the second son, Kirpal is destined to become a doctor, the novel conveys him as a man who

makes a decision to avoid the decidedly modernist fate of becoming a physician simply because birth order demands it. These ordered occupations rules – the eldest son is a soldier, the second son is a doctor – belie an inherent lack of the idealised modernist connection in the Singh family, however, with the influence of parents and a sibling nonetheless outweighed and complicated by the non-family relationships in Kirpal's life. Instead claiming the ‘soldier’ destiny of his older brother, Kirpal joins a Sikh regiment and being duly “shipped to England” (194), a decision which illustrates this contradictory nature, and conveys the novel's concern with the plight of an individual stranded in the no-man's land – neither modern nor postmodern. The lack of belonging he feels within the solidity of the Singh family leads him to search outside ‘established’ models, and he is subsequently drawn to a blended British-Sikh identity outside this family institution, yet he then seemingly seeks to re- integrate himself into the confines of another form of modernist regime as quickly as possible. Expressing a hint of the dual perspective he eventually attains, Kirpal turns a dissecting postmodernist gaze upon the modernist biological community of a Sikh family, musing early on that it was his ayah (nanny) who provided him with the most childhood security, rather than “the mother he loved or...his brother or father, whom he played with” (238). Kirpal reinforces this split-view recollection of the modernist family by suggesting an ayah “probably knows the character of all of the children better than their real parents did” (238), thus marking the beginning of his life-long pattern of searching outside biological bonds for a sense of the security that the novel associates with modernism parameters. It is this paradoxical desire for

traditionalism outside the established modernist family which drives Kirpal to fight on behalf of the British people, a fissured need he ultimately recognizes in himself once he returns to India at the novel's end, noting that "all throughout his life, he would realize later, he was drawn outside the family to find such love....He would be quite old before he realized that about himself, before he could even ask himself that question of whom he loved most" (238).

The modernist machination of *The English Patient*'s British army is portrayed as a prejudiced extension of the historical colonial oppression of the Indian culture, seemingly providing legitimisation for the systematic discrimination against Sikhs under the guise of a wartime need for organisation. Kirpal's perception of this intolerance is benignly multifarious early in the novel, again employing a bifocal vision to recount each painful experience much later in a detached tone that simultaneously acknowledges the naivety of his pre-Hiroshima modernist perspective and the traumatic realisations that now temper his blended recollections. Kirpal's experience in the army therefore represents more than a mere choice between native nationality and an assumed international identity, as his invisibility within the regime forces a wider ideological span, as noted by Kella, who comments that the novel "takes as its subject Western humanism and Western civilization, and it works with binary oppositions between East and West, Asia and Europe, colonized and colonizer, brown and white" (85). Although displaced to another nation in order to defend the country of his oppressors, Kirpal is unperturbed at first by the incongruous dislocation this requires, summarised by Caravaggio's lament that "the trouble with all of us is we

are where we shouldn't be. What are we doing in Africa, in Italy? What is Kip doing dismantling bombs in orchards, for God's sake? What is he doing fighting English wars?" (129-130). The conflict to which Caravaggio refers is a choice between national allegiance and individual values, a collision that also troubles Kirpal's brother, yet Kirpal initially overlooks such issues by exchanging outward modernist autonomy for a quietly-enjoyed postmodern freedom. Kirpal's recollection that his brother "broke the tradition of our family and refused, in spite of being the oldest brother, to join the army" (213) because he "refused to agree to any situation where the English had power" (213), foreshadows his own defiance of Western autonomy, a rebellion the novel shows as beginning with minor digressions from modernist authority. Taking what the text suggests are discreet postmodern reactions to the modernist power surrounding him, Kirpal politely appears to accept imperial rule while continuing to take advantage of the invisibility such modernist prejudice allows him. The passing of time grants Kirpal's recollections a sense of detached judgment, allowing cool comparisons of a life lived with a blended sense of inner autonomy versus an enraged quest for outwardly-established power as illustrated in his neutral account of the army's physical entrance examination in which "a doctor cleared or rejected our bodies with his instruments...the coded results written onto our skin with yellow chalk" (*The English Patient*, 212). Weighing his own outwardly submissive method against his brother's frenzied resentment against British oppression, Kirpal defends his passive stance at this point in the novel;

I did not feel insulted by this. I am sure my brother would have been, would have walked in fury over to the well, hauled up the bucket, and washed the chalk markings away...Quite early on I had discovered the overlooked space open to those of us with a silent life. I didn't argue with the policeman who said I couldn't cycle over a certain bridge or through a specific gate in the fort – I just stood there, still, until I was invisible, and then I went through. Like a cricket. Like a hidden cup of water. You understand? That is what my brother's public battles taught me (213, *The English Patient*).

The novel here places Kirpal in the indistinct position of a Westernized colonial, showing a grudging appreciation of the discrimination he faces while noting that the futile efforts of his raging brother yield little progress in gaining power within the modernist environment of the British army. It is this expression of a postmodernist approach to modernist oppression which conveys Kirpal as a man of hybridised perspectives; just as the novel suggests his rejection of an assigned modernist occupation actually led him to crave a more ordered life in the army, Kirpal is portrayed as feeling comfortable at this point in recognising and taking advantage of the air of invisibility a postcolonial figure suffers/enjoys within a modernist society.

The ambiguous human rights conveyed through Kirpal Singh's experiences in *The English Patient* seem reflective of the teetering scales of world

power described by Robert Young, with Kirpal's intermediary stage of naive British allegiance aligned with a period of significant cultural transition and redistribution of power marked by "the sense of the loss of European history and culture as History and Culture, the loss of their unquestioned place at the centre of the world" (77). Thus, in the temporary vacuum of automatic European superiority following the most ferocious periods of conflict, Kirpal remains, for a time, passive and unaware of his changing societal position, peeling "onions with the same knife he used to strip rubber from a fuze wire" (92) and sleeping "half in and half out of the tent" (81). Kirpal's realisation that his place in the British war effort ultimately constitutes another method of colonial exploitation takes the form of a shuddering progression throughout the novel, when he alters from viewing his brother's repudiation as a pointless endeavour, observing his "body gearing up to respond to this insult or that law" (*The English Patient*, 213) to a mood of awakened anger that means he no longer wishes to remain in the "slipstream of his status as firebrand" (213). Kirpal's identity is thus conveyed as a precarious mixture on the edge of the modern-postmodern divide, a blend of imposed roles and idealised nationality which teeters and collapses when this tension dramatically expands focus to the Western-Eastern collision that was the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

The regime of modernist order Kirpal finds in the army fails to provide the sense of security he had hoped to discover in such an organised society, a quality he paradoxically uncovers amongst the postmodern blend of non-traditional characters he meets upon joining the bomb disposal unit of Lord Suffolk, whom,

as far as Kirpal is concerned, is “the first real gentleman he had met in England” (198). Applying for the job when he finally realises “that in a war you have to take control, and there was a greater chance of choice and life alongside a personality or an individual” (199), Kirpal rapidly discards his previous passive approach and discovers a heartening exception to his now-disillusioned view of the British army, whose hypocrisy and unappreciative nature Kirpal laments; “The English! They expect you to fight for them but they won’t talk to you. Singh. And the ambiguities” (200). The juxtaposition between the novel’s portrayal of Kirpal’s modernist identity within the army, and the organic acceptance he finds with Lord Suffolk is extreme, and constitutes a marked transformation in the novel’s portrayal of Kirpal’s sense of authentic self and nationality. Still opposing his familial view at this point in the novel, albeit affectionately<sup>50</sup>, the life Kirpal finds with Lord Suffolk fulfils his utopian imaginings of a Western family model, a vision he eagerly envelops himself in “as if he were the prodigal returned, offered a chair at the table, embraced with conversation” (202). The family imagery resounds throughout this section of the novel, echoing the gentle care of his ayah in the eau de cologne Miss Morden refreshes Kirpal’s face with, evoking a memory of the scent from childhood when “he has a fever and someone had brushed it onto his body” (216). Significantly, the opening of this period in the novel also includes the first mention of Kirpal Singh’s full name<sup>51</sup>, rather than, as previously, ‘the Sikh’ or ‘the sapper’, and the

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<sup>50</sup> Kirpal’s brother was “not insulted when he heard I had signed up to replace him in the enlistment, no longer to be a doctor, he just laughed and sent a message through our father for me to be careful” (214).

<sup>51</sup> Westbury, England, 1940. P. 193.

mood changes almost instantly, from when Kirpal rides down to Westbury in the front seat of the car with Mr. Harts, Miss Morden and Lord Suffolk. No longer the silent sapper distanced from his family in the Punjab, Kirpal “had been befriended, and he would never forget it” (199).

This period of the novel must be carefully examined, as the irony of Kirpal’s situation emerges when Lord Suffolk essentially inflicts a similar type of colonizing attitude upon Kirpal as the army, yet with an infinitely more respectful and considerate approach. Although it is while staying at Lord Suffolk’s that Kirpal forces himself to sink “claustrophobically into the dough of a mattress” (298), Lord Suffolk’s intention is to gently expose Kirpal to elements of English culture without attempting to quash or degrade Kirpal’s own beliefs, by presenting Western ideas as simply options rather than inherently accurate, and introducing “the customs of England to the young Sikh as if it was a recently discovered culture” (196). This mélange stands in contrast to the defined modernist separation Kirpal previously experienced, with Suffolk’s apparent determination to blend a mixture of backgrounds into a cohesive pseudo-family of equally-valued individuals showing Kirpal the possibilities of ideological fusion. Suffolk therefore represents the significance of a postmodern family of friends, emphasising the bonds which exist outside of nationality and blood, and common to all humans regardless of widespread prejudice, as shown by Suffolk earnestly explaining the intricacies of buying a good walking stick “as if Singh were thinking of stepping into the Tudor corner store in his uniform and turban to chat casually with the owners about canes” (197).

The novel's representation of Lord Suffolk acts as a partial redemption of Western modernist culture, offering a moderated view of the non-biological bonds Kirpal finds with a man who "swept into Pamela's Tea Room...and shepherded in his clan – secretary, chauffeur and sapper – as if they were his children" (198). It is within this quasi-familial structure that Kirpal temporarily finds the utter belonging he seeks, yet this scenario remains inherently unsustainable within the larger narrative: although Kirpal has found a comfortable identity, it remains in an assigned rather than chosen form; thus the modern-postmodern tension driving this novel must progress, regardless of the kindness of his current surrounds. The narrative forces this development with the deaths of Lord Suffolk, Miss Morden and Mr. Harts when a bomb explodes, a devastation Kirpal obscures beneath a resumed single-minded modernist desire to concentrate solely on the bomb which now lies in front of him, enveloping himself in the 'white sound' of a wholly-focused mind. This degree of tight focus signals Kirpal's movement back from the postmodernist idyll of Lord Suffolk's team, reverting to the modernist sterility which aided his survival prior to the Westbury bomb unit, stating that he was "one of those never interested in the choreography of power" (208), and proceeding to redouble his commitment to the defined boundaries of modernism, feeling "capable only of reconnaissance, of locating a solution" (208). This modernist oscillation marks the development of Kirpal's next identity in his progression towards hybridised authenticity, and marks the final modernist fluctuation before he joins the villa group as a man of immense self-sufficiency and privacy. The novel emphasises this movement as an ideological transition rather than the shock

or common trauma of warfare; a centring movement within the Western-Eastern dichotomy that torments Kirpal constitutes a defiance of the modernist coldness which greeted him in the Western world as “a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world” (209). This marks the start of his “defences of character against all that, trusting only those who befriended” him (209).

Kirpal’s reaction to the breakdown of his postmodernist Eden allows him to take refuge from the exposing freedoms of an unconventional life, replacing uncharted choices with the secured restrictions of “the anonymous machine of the army” (208), a decision which enables him to effectively temporarily erase his time with Lord Suffolk by immersing himself into a new group unaware of his history. This, like the assigned nature of his time with Suffolk, is transitory and unsustainable within the overall narrative arc which is drawing Kirpal towards an identity chosen actively and autonomously. However, temporarily driven towards modernist order by a will to forget rather than a desire to find, Kirpal’s reactionary choice renews the modern-postmodern tension of the novel while allowing a subtle foreshadowing of the crucial epiphany when Kirpal’s reminiscences see his modernist desire for an unrelentingly singular focus overlap with a future postmodernist recollection of how this focus also disables his ability to cope. This duality signifies the beginning of the novel’s portrayal of Kirpal’s colliding modern and postmodern perspectives, depicting his current outlook alongside the growth and self-awareness he will soon attain. The text conveys this through a split approach which reveals Kirpal’s present-tense musings on the

fragility of modernist ideals and his past-tense belief in the calming power of its order. Therefore, the novel suggests that, although with hindsight Kirpal sees all structured life must eventually disintegrate regardless of the temporary respite offered by modernist compartmentalisation, he also retains a sense of respect for modernist concentration as a coping strategy, reflecting that “later, when there was a whole personal history or events and moments in his mind, he would need something equivalent to white sound to burn or bury everything while he thought of the problems in front of him” (206). This clash is solidified by an echo of the spatially-consuming imagery which accompanies the first announcement of the atomic bomb exploding in Hiroshima, as Kirpal’s modernist need for white noise is ultimately fulfilled by the event which will drive him to reject all Western modernism, in the form of “pure thunder” (295) and “a sudden sunlight of lightening through the tent wall...like a flash of contained phosphorus” (295) marking the radio report of a “the new word he has heard in theory rooms...which is ‘nuclear’” (295).

**Shattering the ‘fragile white island’ (*The English Patient*, 301):**

**Hiroshima, Modernist Nationality and Kirpal Singh**

The monumental event of the Hiroshima bombing stakes a fundamental ravine throughout the novel, dividing Kirpal’s core identity in a series of ‘before and after’ comparisons which register the unmatchable impact of such a global event upon each individual. Prior to the crystallizing event, however, the novel chooses to align the boundary between the modern and postmodern characters through an exhibition of both similarity and eventual difference, initially placing

Kirpal in a similar social position to that of Count Ladislaus de Almásy, a man with whom Kirpal resonates with and connects to prior to his epiphany. Finding a kindred allegiance in their vague status detached from Western definitions, the men personify the two sides of the novel's Western-Eastern border, symbolising knowledge and naivety, acceptance and rejection, and growth and decline. Although this variance creates an underlying chasm between the Western and the Eastern which ultimately proves a divergence too vast to overcome, the English patient fulfils the vital counter-point to Kirpal's journey, and Almásy's identity formation will therefore be discussed in depth in the chapter Three.

The alliance born of difference which Kirpal shares with the English patient initially appears to supersede the historical power imbalance symbolised by the pair, with the English patient seemingly considering Kirpal a worthy heir to his knowledge and a reflection of himself in a younger, unencumbered form. Conveying the paternal relationship through the reversed imagery of *Kim*, the novel suggests an altering global society in which the wise teacher can equally be Indian or English, a reflection of the swinging balance of Western-Eastern power at this time. This opportunity for recompense condensed within Kirpal and Almásy's relationship is fleeting, however, with the novel seemingly unable to rest upon such a sweetly simplistic reconciliation of the Western dominance of Eastern will, since between the two still "lay a treacherous and complex journey. It was a very wide world" (119). Thus, once the truth of the West's dismissive attitude towards Eastern lives is definitively demonstrated by Hiroshima, the English patient and Kirpal Singh find they can no longer ignore the cultures they

represent, and “could imitate nothing but what they were. There was no defence but to look for the truth in others” (124). It is precisely this truth revealed by others which acts as the catalyst for Kirpal’s epiphany, as the voice of the English patient, the defiant advice of his brother and the radio report collide to create a moment of utter clarity in which Kirpal recognises that he can no longer feign comfort in his passive Eastern role in Western society, and cannot continue to minimise his anonymous position outside of his own country. Thus, for Kirpal and the Western world, the radio announcement indeed represents “the death of a civilisation” (304) and the demise of the ‘decent’ Western society he once believed existed. Heightened imagery conveys this progression, with each man’s skin hue now increasingly emphasised as Kirpal recoils from the society he willed himself to join, suddenly “condemned, separate from the world, his brown face weeping” (301). Once united by difference, they find that ethnicity now constitutes an irreversible demarcation between the men as the charred skin that previously allowed him to evade national classification turns on the English patient as his undefined Western nationality now marks him as a representative ‘everyman’ of oppressive imperial rule. Holding “the burned neck in his sights” (302), Kirpal now construes the patient’s indistinct citizenship as his personification of all men who inflicted this “tremor of Western wisdom” (302) upon the East, no longer a man of specific nationality but simply a symbol of dominance and prejudice. Though Almásy is not an Englishmen by national origin, such sub-groupings become redundant in the new binary global community comprised solely of ‘the bombers’ and ‘the bombed’, prompting

Kirpal's altered form of modernist clarity: "American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishmen" (304). Thus, the two elements of Kirpal's identity which have rebounded and clashed up until this point suddenly combine to form a cohesive image of authentic belief, now holding an omniscient and irreversible vision of the world around him, "seeing everything, all those around him, in a different light...the young man's dark brown eyes would reach the new revealed enemy" (302). This altered perspective abruptly recognises the flaw in his assumed identity which placed the beliefs of a "fragile white island" (301) ahead of his own heritage, the error which meant he ignored his brother's urgings, now wailing that although he was told to "never trust Europeans. Never shake hands with them", he was awed by the Western customs, lamenting that "oh, we were easily impressed – by speeches and medals...what have I been doing for these last few years?" (303). Now that the Western world has so flippantly discarded the customs they inflicted on others, the manners and codes of behaviour they claimed as tantamount to their superior civility are in tatters, as is the socio-cultural order Kirpal has been striving to emulate. The modern-postmodern tension thus hangs shredded at this point in the novel, an ideological argument which has spilled out from abstract concepts into a horrific clash of the modernist superiority and postmodernist blended passivity which undermines the base integrity of civilisation itself. There is nothing but a vacuum of scope, nothing remaining but a complete loss of integral ideas as the modernist order disintegrates, consumed by the event which makes Kirpal feel that "all the winds of the world have been sucked into Asia"

(305). This constitutes the finality of the modern-postmodern argument which has threaded throughout the identity formation of Kirpal Singh; he is neither a modernist Westerner, nor a modernist Sikh, nor a static combination of the two, he is an oscillating blend of beliefs of which only one element is certain: “his name is Kirpal Singh, and he does not know what he is doing here” (305).

*The English Patient*’s preoccupation with the intangible yet hugely influential role of concepts of nationality upon the establishment or corruption of identity emanates throughout its characters, particularly resonant in Kirpal Singh, whose epiphany marks an unsettling end to the novel’s collective search for a sense of authentic self. The unresolved nature of the text’s portrayal of Kirpal’s exit appears a dual homage to the attributes and limitations of the modern and the postmodern, definitively isolating Kirpal from the modernist discrimination of the Western world by re-immersing him in Indian culture, yet offering fragments of regret for his previously assumed identity. The line between the modern and the postmodern therefore remains a dynamic border, as Kirpal becomes the modernist doctor tradition that demands, eats dinner at a table where “all of their hands are brown” (320) with a family who “move with ease in their customs and habits” (320), yet such order and belonging fails to sate his modernist urges, despite his finding himself “at an age when he suddenly realizes that the sun of India exhausts him” (318). Although entrenched in his established life, he contains an element that yearns for the memories of the postmodern confusion of the “turbulent river of space” between him and Hana, expressed by his surreal ability to imagine her in her own country in a dual time and space, blending memory and

longing with his abject refusal to reply to her letters in an alloyed identity of modernism and ambiguity which is simply “his character, he supposed” (319). The complexity of this incomplete ending seems characteristic of *The English Patient*’s expression of a compulsion to partially reconnect what Kella describes as ‘the family of man’, despite the insurmountable variation which plagues a genuine sense of relatedness. Though the problematic elements of overcoming such a chasm remain, Kella notes there are still shafts of positive light in the novel’s conclusion, in that the penultimate sections may also be read as “wrenching away from the idea of the essential sameness of all individuals and toward a concept of community that can accommodate racial, cultural, and national differences” (85). Ultimately, however, Kella makes this merely a fragile suggestion, somewhat despondently concluding that “this move cannot be sustained, however, and the novel ends by confirming, through loss, the value of the family of man” (85).

The horrific collision of Western and Eastern aspirations symbolized by Hiroshima acts as a catalyst for the character progression in *The English Patient*, a simultaneously factual and symbolic event within the wider narrative of the characters’ search for a meaningful nationality and authentic identity amongst the tumultuous insecurity of a society during warfare. With such a narrative, the novel seemingly explores the formation of transient identities during an anarchic period of global history, while also evoking a much grander span of human interaction and international behaviour. Employing a controlled lens, *The English Patient* alternates between a wide-pan image of international invasion, a zoomed tableau

of the personalised impacts of warfare, and finally a holistic view of global warfare with the world-altering bombing of Hiroshima. The atomic bomb, therefore, signals the novel's return to an epic scope, renewing the Western-Eastern divide and modern-postmodern demarcation through an event which changed what was deemed acceptable during conflict. In countering the seeping blended quality which created a fragile link of commonality between polar positions, this restoration of division suggests ideological harmony and opposition are always merely transitory within the grand spatiality of time, balanced and fluctuating between times of understanding and periods of abject opposition. It is therefore appropriate, given the abstract tension which sees modernist ideals battle the lure of postmodernist thought throughout the novel, that Kirpal's concluding choice is an alternating oscillation rather than a finite decision in favour of either outlook. Noting the contrast between Ondaatje's attempts to "assert a timeless view of history, a *topos* without a territory" (84) and the extremely personalised reading of the modern-postmodern conflict, Kella suggests the novel loses its deliberate detachment despite its best efforts, as the sense of abstract distance "is severely undercut prior to its final reassertion" (84). This is perhaps the essence of the novel's portrayal of the identity formation of Kirpal Singh, a young soldier who grows to represent the conflicting urge to escape what is known from birth and to find a sense of genuine integrity and self-respect, all of which are integral elements of a novel which, Kella notes, "sets forth a critique of human essence that brings into focus the material forces which shape allegiances and create or destroy communities" (84).

## **Chapter Three**

### **Identity, Landscape and the English patient**

*“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” (The English Patient, 188)*

*The English Patient* deliberately adopts a tone of obscured, unresolved ambiguity with respect to its portrayal of the modern-postmodern tension, and its influence upon individual identity and perceptions of nationality. As the novel's looming figure of mystery for the majority of the present-tense narrative, Count Ladislaus de Almásy's ambiguous memory – or, unwillingness to disclose his memories – and charred body allows him to evade a defined nationality, yet also casts him in the role of an ‘every-national’ man, leaving him effectively responsible for all Western actions after Kirpal's epiphany. Through Almásy's function as both a counter and contributor to the epiphany of Kirpal Singh, and the oppositional views of Madox (prior to his return to Somerset), the novel creates a complex series of juxtapositions that loop and overlap to create an elliptical representation of the varying facets of the modern and postmodern within identity. Through these complex ideological junctions, the novel expresses the similarities and divergences between alternating views, and the solace which may be found in combining elements of each to form a hybridised middle-ground. As mentioned previously, the novel's portrayal of the modern-postmodern interaction between Kirpal and Almásy manifests in the form of a Western/Eastern divide, despite Almásy's refusal to define neither his nationality

nor any other meaningful aspect of his identity. This informational vacuity forces Almásy, with his quasi-English-sounding accent, into the role of modernist Westerner and thus drives an irrevocable wedge between the men, with Almásy becoming a benign ‘sparring partner’ against whom Kirpal tests his growing anti-Western awareness. The novel’s representation of the modern-postmodern tension threads throughout the relationships of Almásy and Katharine, and of Almásy and Madox, which each reflect the inherent contradictions of both the postmodern and the modern, respectively. The inconsistencies within each of these relationships grant the novel a prevailing mood of unpredictability, with its representation of a binary tension morphing into a fluctuating account which disallows a ‘neat’, segregated conclusion; Katharine craves the reassurance of names and ownership with Almásy and the certainties of a civilized life in an irrigated city, yet by embarking upon their affair risks her marriage to a socially-connected husband with whom she already shares all of these modernist luxuries. Similarly, Madox’s belief in modernist traditions clearly juxtaposes Almásy’s fluid morality, yet this contrast becomes unhinged when Madox finds his British idyll destroyed by the modernist endeavour of warfare. Using ideas of the power of naming, modernist ownership, nationality, and landscape, the novel presents these two relationships as symbolic of the flaws that exist within either outlook, since neither the stated postmodernist, Almásy, nor the initially entrenched modernists, Kirpal, Katharine and Madox, seem to attain internal tranquility through a unilateral ideological stance. To read Almásy and Katharine’s affair as an allegorical warning against modernist pride also necessitates an assumption that is simply not validated by the

text, with the clarity of the novel's message remaining obscured beneath layered imagery which alternately expresses the lovers' dual need for modernist names and for oblivious anonymity. Thus, while Almásy (and, to a lesser extent, Katharine) struggle with the dual desire to belong and escape, Madox's stable figure of convinced modernity is also complicated by his late epiphany, thus subverting the novel's only apparent suggestion of the comforting sentiments of tradition and lineage found within a modernist approach.

### **'Compulsive Ambiguity': Modernity, Postmodernity, and the English patient**

Expressing through Almásy a movement from postmodernist to pseudo-modernist and then back again, the novel portrays his progression as that of a man who places his faith in the abyss of ambiguity and loses such fears of categorization upon finding love, only to revert to a fatalistic postmodern outlook after his love's death. The compulsion to erase the haunting trauma of Katharine's death resonates throughout Ondaatje's depiction of Almásy, expressed in the collision of memories and consuming grief which renders him unable to accept any definition or named category for fear of these borders making his mind – and thus, his memory also – too vivid. Yet he also remains compelled to relive the moment in which he needed a single modernist name and could not locate it. This dual desire manifests in Almásy's rejection of modernist borders and concepts of bordered nationality, creating a contradictory desire to form a clear cartographical image of the ever-moving desert landscape, which suggests a form of security accessible to Almásy by musing upon remembered, specific, landscape. This

spatial recollection seemingly allows Almásy to hover between full awareness in the present and total immersion in the past, an ambiguous state which, Kateryna Longley<sup>52</sup> notes, combines vague emotional reminiscences and defined landscape so that “the act of retracing the physical movement of the body through particular spaces with their unique configurations enables a mapping of the context of a remembered moment, so that emotions come flooding back, released by an act of *spatial memory*” (9). Thus, the novel presents Almásy as an anguished character consumed by an incompatible compulsion to both memorize and escape definitions, as he feels helplessly suffocated by the same modernist boundaries he habitually uses to give reference and thus meaning to his precious memories. This denial and pursuit of modernist clarity that leaves him trapped in a surreal no-man’s-land between two belief systems is an identity further destabilized by the steady supply of painkillers that keep him in the grey twilight of existence between life and death. Almásy’s past and present immobilize him by simultaneously granting the momentum of memory and the status of grief, a duality expressed by Petar Ramadanovic<sup>53</sup>, who muses, “it is a strange thing to remember. To be at once here and there: to be with those who are no longer, no longer with you, and to be apart from them. It is perhaps even stranger to try to or to be compelled to remember the past” (1). Thus, Almásy’s identity, like Kirpal’s, is depicted as a blend of present recollections and belated understanding. However, while Kirpal’s identity shifts dramatically after his time in Italy, the

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<sup>52</sup> Longley, Kateryna. ‘Places of Refuge: Postcolonial Spaces’. *Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*, No. 44, April 1997. Pp 8-21.

<sup>53</sup> Ramadanovic, Petar. *Forgetting Futures: On Memory, Trauma, and Identity*. Lexington Books, 2001.

Villa holds an inevitable finality for Almásy's identity, his progression seemingly halted as he awaits death. The static nature of Almásy's existence allows him to function on two levels within the novel – his immobility grants time for him to reflect upon memories and thus convey his own paradoxical experience of the modern and postmodern worlds, while his bedridden status also casts him as an inert symbol of the Western modernism Kirpal eventually comes to despise. Thus, in contrast to Kirpal's progressive rejection of modernist Western society, Almásy remains in an arrested postmodern state where memories grant the only real possibility of resolution. His motionless recollections mean he acts as both an ideological counter to Kirpal, and as a largely benign postmodern vehicle through which Kirpal tests and shapes his identity.

This lack of personal history is a fundamental reason why Almásy's stance remains so indistinguishable: his evasion casts him as Western according to modernist formats – which constructs the Western-Eastern divide of Almásy and Kirpal – yet this secrecy also obscures whether he is truly a vehement postmodernist, or simply a severely disillusioned modernist. This lack of definition and somewhat complacent denial of any form of Westernized identity acts as a tool, Shannon Smyrl<sup>54</sup> notes, which allows Almásy to conveniently locate “the possibility of self-determination outside the realm of determinate meaning...”, thus neatly decreeing that variation is the only certain element of life since “within the mirage of language itself, the only invention – the only identity – is that of pure difference” (11). Such evasion thus foils attempts to homogenize

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<sup>54</sup> Smyrl, Shannon. ‘The Nation as “International Bastard”: Ethnicity and Language in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*’. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2003. Pp 9-38.

through grouping, as the novel carefully frustrates the modernist boundaries of nationality, and allows Almásy to remain a fringe member of the Villa San Girolamo society without the disclosure of a firm ideological stance.

The minimization of Kirpal and Almásy's differences, pre-Hiroshima, allows an initially uncomplicated interpretation of nationality through these two characters, presenting their rootless alienation as a form of what Smyrl labels a "singular identity definitive of the new decentralizing global culture" (10), a commonality marked by Almásy's universalizing comment that he and Kip "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" (188). Having created what Smyrl deems "a rhetorical experience of difference and erasure that forms the basis of his self-construction" (11), the novel suggests that Almásy's remark amounts to a modernist manipulation that attempts to merge Kip's indeterminate identity into his own deliberately vague one, absorbing Kip's voice into his own narrative and once again denying Kip an authoritative discourse via a form of re-imperialisation which Kella calls the:

universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm...Dominant groups project their own experience as representative of humanity as such", meaning that "the notion of an "essential" humanity denies and thereby legitimizes the operations of political, social, economic, and discursive power that construct identities on various levels (79-80).

This attempt to invalidate Kirpal's opposing view reinforces the novel's obfuscation, implying that Almásy is deliberately thwarting even the possibility of a defined – if still highly unbalanced, and confused – ideological resolution.

Although the uneasiness both men feel in their inauthentic identity represents an initial bonding point, with “the differences between his and Kip’s experiences...insignificant in this assertion of shared identity characterized by difference” (Smyrl, 10), these differences ultimately break through the shield which protects their villa existence and after Hiroshima produce their re-segregation. When Almásy’s burns can no longer obscure his clear status as a Westerner – despite his refusal to acknowledge a specific nationality – he is instantly branded as an ideological enemy in Kirpal’s mind, a transformation which hits suddenly when Kirpal abruptly realises that “they would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation” (304). Suddenly aware that the men’s society is only sustained by his continued submission to Western dominance, Kirpal realises he must defy the perhaps well-intentioned control of the English patient in order to position himself outside Western culture and in defiance of its inherent cultural oppression: thus, the novel grants Kirpal reactionary strength while Almásy flounders in immobility. Despite Almásy’s seeming awareness of the destructive role of such a homogenizing Western directive, he nonetheless fails – whether accidentally or conveniently – to recognise that their escape from the bounds of modernist definition was not necessarily an active decision for Kirpal, therefore the oppositional clarity is again obscured. In contrast to Almásy’s modernist defiance, Kirpal initially dutifully defines his sense of self in

accordance with Western influence, yet retains a very firm idea of where his current identity places him – at the mercy of imperial power. The English patient’s purposeful unwillingness to define himself suddenly seems driven by unclear motivations - perhaps to avoid accepting responsibility and guilt on behalf of the Western culture’s treatment of the East - compared to Kirpal’s ready awareness of his “self-identification as the foreign other, silenced and invisible” (Smyrl, 12). However, the vacuity of Western oppression leaves an opening, allowing an opportunity for Kirpal to conceptualize his growing unease with his role in Western society, so that the novel’s conclusion constitutes “his rejection of this position of difference and invisibility as a productive basis of cultural identification” (Smyrl, 12). Simply put, Kirpal no longer chooses to define himself solely in the Western terms that highlight what he is *not*, in favour of an organic, self-directed analysis to uncover what he *is*. Therefore, “while the English patient floats in the endless possibility of signification, Kip generates the qualities of difference and insignificance as a function of his exclusion from the process of identification” (Smyrl, 13), a sentiment expressed through the novel’s depiction of the English patient’s confused progression from postmodern to modern, then to a blended confusion, compared to Kip’s more definitive movement away from Western ‘ideals’. Thus, although the two men become aligned with opposing sides of the feudal and ideological divide, the novel never allows a sense of comfortable resolution to emerge, nor to capture a permanent sense of Almásy’s fluctuations. The text therefore continues to present the English patient as an unfathomable symbol, a catalyst, and an ideological conundrum.

The function of the English patient within this novel is, as mentioned previously, to occupy a dual-faceted position in which, although Almásy certainly provides fodder for the anti-Western revolt of Kirpal Singh, he also conveys an identity recoiling from a Western perspective. This allows further exploration of the role of national and social borders in influencing the way lives are conducted, and the security or disillusionment one finds in the modernist assurances of established nationality, geography and names. These halting recollections and fragmented images slowly paint a frieze of the critical events which construct Almásy's ideological stance, which, together with Kirpal's, create a contrasting glimpse of each character's motivations. While the novel explores Kirpal's final revelations and offers merely a muted account of his early life, the brief account of Almásy's final days is counterweighted by a searing exposure of his pre-Villa experience. With such an oppositional narrative path, *The English Patient* suggests the diverse and yet common nature of the quest for identity, as both Almásy and Kirpal paradoxically seek and avoid a defined identity, simultaneously attracted and repulsed by the narrow societal categorizations which characterise a modernist society. In the case of Almásy, it seems as if the ambiguity of landscape, the obsessive inclusion and avoidance of defined nationalities, and the chaotic uncertainty of the period means that "there was no certainty to the song anymore, the singer could only be one voice against all the mountains of power" (*The English Patient*, 285-286). It is through such pervading ambiguity that the reader must endeavour to uncover the truth behind Almásy's

fluctuating facades of identity, a paradox which ultimately, however, remains unresolved by the novel's vague quasi-resolution.

### **'Landmarks': Exploring Modernity and Postmodernity through Landscape Imagery**

*The English Patient*'s portrayal of modernity and postmodernity as influential components of identity relies heavily upon landscape imagery to convey the conflicting nature of these two ideological outlooks, expressing the fluctuating perspective of Almásy, in particular, initially through the ambiguous shelled Villa San Girolamo and later the transient disorientation of the Libyan Desert. Capturing and reflecting the state of Almásy's personal progression throughout the novel, these diverse environments offer metaphorical insight into the haze of the English patient's history, as his present-tense immobility within the near-ruined Villa is countered by his past deliberate choice to roam the expanse of the desert, seemingly content with a world "where nothing was strapped down or permanent" (24) until his identity is fundamentally altered when his love for Katharine demands a temporary detour into modernist fixity. These environments convey a sense of two realms colliding, as the known and unnamed worlds clash and combine to create a zone of ambiguous fluidity, referred to by Longley, who notes that "over and over again the novel shows these unfixable spaces being invaded temporarily by spaces that are filled with clear signposts and references" (16), evoking the clarity of the patient's childhood which was filled with familiar "birdcalls that he could recognise from a halting fragment. A fully named world" (22).

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An architectural embodiment of a fractured pseudo-Eden, the Villa San Girolamo's near-ruined husk symbolises the ambiguous identities of those who dwell within. With "little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth", the Villa offers only fleeting security to Almásy and the other characters, emphasising the broken identity of the English patient through the pervading physical reflection of the modern-postmodern blur which casts a surreal human pallor over the inanimate garden statues with their missing limbs, and the destroyed walls that allow life to enter the old nunnery and slowly transform the building into "an open aviary" (14). The sense of exposure and threat emanates throughout the landscape, with destroyed roofing leaving the Villa's interior open to the "drifting landscape of stars" (15) and forbidding even the faint revelation of candle light, to avoid attracting the "brigands who annihilated everything they came across" (15). The disordered "besieged fortress" (45), therefore, expresses the immobilised shell of Almásy through its immensely impaired state: no longer a secure sanctuary yet still a temporary haven, the Villa is now merely a lingering protective shell in which "outdoor staircases disappeared in midair". Just as the permanent yet fractured building provides little division between the inner and outer, Almásy's burns render him a symbol of stagnant identity hovering between modernity and postmodernity, ruminating in the memory of trauma which Dominick LaCapra<sup>55</sup> describes as "precisely the gap – the open wound – in the past that resists being entirely filled in, healed, or harmonized in the present" (73).

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<sup>55</sup> LaCapra, Dominick. "Lanzmann's *Shoah*: 'Here There Is No Why.'" *Critical Inquiry* 23 (1997): 231-269. Cited in Kella, 2000, P. 73.

It is within this quasi-comfort of the Villa that Almásy realises the Libyan Desert through intermittent snatches of memory, further disrupting both the past and present landscapes and creating an explicit juxtaposition between the moribund ambiguity of Almásy's current Villa existence and his past desert identity prior to meeting Katharine, which, although committed to the obliviousness of postmodernity, was nonetheless assured.

Functioning as the fundamental reflection of Almásy's identity progression, the desert landscape becomes synonymous with his paradoxical desire to carefully document the desert topography and escape into its shifting abyss. The moving canvas of the desert allows a freedom from modernist ideals, an indefinable space which "refuses all that underpins the strategies of war...refuses to be *legible*" (Longley, 16) except to the cartographers whose intimate exploration means they combine "the threads of maps and charts into an individual memory-fragment of a *particular place*" (16), the fusion of landscape and human relationships making the transitory environment suddenly deeply personal, a link which allows "the map of the world" to "slide into place" (20).

Almásy is seemingly aware of this mingled intent, yet remains unable to penetrate its meaning, noting that although his life "in many ways, even as an explorer, has been governed by words" (245), these agents of modernist classification are always tempered by the brevity of his language, which offers mere "shards written down" (245) as fleeting glimpses of "rumours and legends. Charted things" (245). Almásy's account of the desert thus evokes the tidal sway of the modern-postmodern tension which rules his identity, as specific

descriptions of desert landscape are doggedly outweighed by the vagueness of a world which alters with each wind.

The defining modernist locale is the Gilf Kebir, which acts as the only significant landmark in both a literal and metaphorical sense and embodies a desert version of what Longley describes as “the official spaces designated by geography, nationalism and history” (17). A “large plateau resting in the Libyan Desert” (144), the Gilf Kebir signifies the elemental contrasts of the novel, as a modernist end point which drives the explorers onwards into the beguiling desert, a static central feature in the stifling heat of the arid expanse “the size of Switzerland” (144), and the motivating “heart” (144) which bonds a dissimilar collection of nationless men. In this disorientating haze of human endeavour, the interaction of the landscape and exploration form a fragile collusion which buckles and strengthens under the collision of fickle conditions and determined purpose. As the struggle of modern cartographical classification and the postmodern oblivion of the environment conflict daily, each definite movement is countered by the bewildering desert and its refusal to become a mere series of map positions. This merges the ideas of modernist cartography and the intangible postmodernism of memories, suggesting it is the collective fusion of the two which grants meaning to landscape, with the novel conveying the significance of the vague ‘cul-de-sacs’ within charted nations since “it is by the accumulations of such intense private spaces that people’s lives are shaped” (Longley, 19). The desert winds thus act as a type of postmodern environmental counter to the Gilf Kebir, creating a dichotomy that poses the elusive but defined plateau against the

erratic winds and their numerous names. The unpredictability with which each wind attacks, and the intricacies of so many complex names, emphasises the juxtaposition of the search for definition in the desert – through mapping and names – against the futility of attempts to pin down such a postmodern landscape. These attempts to define the indeterminate desert through naming and labeling are, in this novel, representative of the modernist dilemma in a postmodern world.

The personification of the desert winds in *The English Patient* performs a crucial function in inscribing ideology onto the desiccated landscape, by juxtaposing the impossibility of predicting the fickle postmodern winds in their numerous guises with the explorers' desire to find solace and security in naming, discovering, and classifying the indefinable. The sense of achievement Almásy finds in documenting exploration inherently validates the comfort of modernist naming and labels, with his admission that "Words....They have a power" (249) emphasised in the implied control and dignity bestowed by a name when recalling "the –, the secret wind of the desert, whose name was erased by a king after his son died within it" (18), suggesting that to remove a name is tantamount to removing an autonomy, power, thus invalidating an identity. Such imagery, which strongly links a label to status and social authority, therefore conveys the modernist certainty in definitions, and provides the ideological foil to Almásy's desire for oblivion.

#### **'Gyges and Candaules': Modernity, Postmodernity and Love**

The relationship of Almásy and Katharine Clifton creates the sense of duality emphasised by Ondaatje's exploration of how the strengthened identity

some find in modernist labels can become a homogenizing limitation. Although described as a modernist woman who “had always wanted words, she loved them, grew up on them” (253), it is notable that Katharine Clifton is rarely called by her name for much of the book. The novel often only allows generalised references to “his new wife” (151) and “the Cliftons” (152) to deliberately attach her to the modernist institution of marriage. The marriage of Katharine and Geoffrey Clifton initially provides a striking image of the modern-postmodern struggle in the desert, with Geoffrey remaining the novel’s blandly static, modernist element around which Katharine’s identity circles before ultimately spinning off on a tangential direction with Almásy. Ondaatje utilizes landscape and names to form the integral components of this imagery, depicting Katharine’s husband as a reluctant lover of the desert, who instead holds a modernist admiration for the group which “grew out of awe at our stark order, into which he wanted to fit himself” (152). In contrast to the novel’s depiction of Geoffrey’s attempt to impose hierarchical structuring upon the shifting zones of the desert, Katharine seemingly arrives intent upon merging the two worlds, and it is this will to form a hybridized semi-modernist existence in the desert which bonds her to Almásy and ultimately leaves her trapped between the modernist position of marriage and the postmodernist world outside it. Referred to briefly by her name for the first time when she recites poetry and thus “dragged her university days into our midst to describe the stars” (153), Katharine’s name marks the moment Almásy has steadfastly avoided, the moment when he “fell in love with a voice” (153) and becomes reluctantly seduced by the modernist desire for ownership he has evaded

for decades. Conveying the sense of this moment as a fragmented epiphany, Ondaatje intersperses Katharine's arrival with emphatic landscape imagery to connect the intersecting components of modernist naming and postmodernist landscape imagery as an expression of the altering ideological balance, noting that although "the desert could not be claimed or owned" (147), a simple modernist poetry recitation can shift the emotional landscape as easily as the gradually strengthening breeze, with Almásy noting that "eventually we looked down, and the surface of the desert had changed" (146).

The collision of modernism and postmodernism through naming and landscape resonates throughout Almásy and Katharine's affair, as the novel places the lovers in an ideological opposition which emanates from every facet of their identity. A woman with "classical blood in her face" (153) descended from parents who were "famous, apparently, in the world of legal history" (153), Katharine emerges as the quintessentially modernist figure who embraces the defined and established elements of society, and thus functions as a deliberate counter to the blended identity of Almásy, who immerses himself in the dryness of the stifling desert, yet remains aware that he is "among water people" (20). The contrast of parched desert landscape and the irrigated coolness of Western 'civilisation' therefore establishes the first divide between Katharine and Almásy, each devoted to their respectively modern and postmodern landscape, yet it subsequently illustrates the idiosyncrasy of Almásy, who finds serenity in the postmodern dunes, yet nonetheless equates modernist names - and therefore, identity - with the rare and treasured hidden waters of the desert. While the novel

allows Katharine to maintain a predominantly modernist position, Almásy moves between the ideological extremes, relishing the oblivion of the vast abyss yet experiencing a repeated urge to “build a raft” (20), who loathes ownership yet states “this is my shoulder, not her husband’s...this is my shoulder”(166), and compares the comfort of an authentic identity with the purity of a desert oasis which allows a man to “slip into a name as if within a discovered well, and in its shadowed coolness be tempted never to leave such containment” (150). This conflicting imagery of hidden moisture and arid heat expresses the modern-postmodern tension through landscape, with a modernist identity remaining the elusive and quenching water Almásy refuses to acknowledge until he meets Katharine. She is repeatedly linked to this modernist sense of moisture and fluidity Almásy seemingly finds both precious and frightening: Katharine, “who misses moisture...has always loved low green hedges and ferns” (163), had “grown up within gardens, among moistness, with words” (181), becomes an oasis for Almásy who muses that “in the desert the most loved waters, like a lover’s name, are carried blue in your hands” (150). The novel’s modern-postmodern tension therefore becomes the underlying foundation of Almásy and Katharine’s bond, a fluctuating connection which encompasses the desire to name and demur, to own and escape, an oppositional relationship which “fell into patterns” (160) against the backdrop of exploring the “half-invented world of the desert” (160).

The landscape imagery, which expresses the divergence of outlook that divides Almásy and Katharine through moisture and aridity, evolves to

encompass the dichotomy of names versus anonymity as the novel progresses and the ramifications of their relationship intensify, signifying the text's portrayal of a swerve in Almásy's ideological identity as he is pulled towards the modernist desire to validate his and Katharine's bond through the conventions of traditional marital naming and ownership. Suggesting the impossibility of lasting tranquility between a woman who finds comfort in the "line back to her ancestors that was tactile" (180) and a man who "had erased the path he had emerged from" (181), it is precisely the recognition that Katharine "loved him in spite of such qualities of anonymity in himself" (181) which marks a turning point in the modernist-postmodernist balance of Almásy. Gradually drawing together alternating imagery to form a hybridized identity, the novel shows the convergence of the forbidden comforts of modernist mapping and Almásy's urge to 'own' Katharine as his wife, with their relationship evoking the grey blend of modernity and postmodernity within which Almásy hovers, "under the millimetre of haze just above the inked fibres of a map" (261-262), yet no longer certain of his own positioning: "how high is he above the land? How low is he in the sky?" (186). Thus, when Geoffrey's discovery of Katharine's affair and subsequent revenge leave them stranded in the desert, the collision of modernism and postmodernism begins to pull and disrupt in the "Cave of Swimmers" (263) deep within the Libyan desert, as polar ideology and identities become as blended as "a mind travelling east and west in the guise of a sandstorm" (263).

The modern-postmodern tension which winds through Almásy and Katharine's relationship manifests in the guise of landscape imagery, as the

watered and barren conflict, and the comparison of naming and established lineage against the oblivious anonymity of the desert, ultimately reaching fruition within the dark confines of a swimmers' cave in the desert as their ideological differences collide for a final time. The modernist-postmodernist tension of naming imagery which haunts the novel now becomes a mere request to "kiss me and call me by my name" (185), only gently arguing against the postmodernist will which drove Almásy to stand in a room "so still sometimes, so wordless sometimes, as if the greatest betrayal...would be to reveal one more inch of...character" (185). This soft, non-confrontational meeting of modernity and postmodernity within the cave offers a brief respite from the harsh conflict up until this point, and allows for Almásy's weakened compromise which no longer forbids names but now desires an organic history be "marked on my body...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" (277). The quiet moments of calm ideological collusion in the Cave are inherently fleeting, however, as Ondaatje's novel emphasises the intrusion of external society upon the intimate bond of Almásy and Katharine to ultimately highlight the rarity of such an agreeable resolution in a world that operates predominantly in a state of feudal divide between modernist and postmodernist viewpoints. Thus, the temporary concord between Almásy and Katharine rapidly reverts to the sense of discontinuity and the overarching lack of acquiescence that Carrie Dawson<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Dawson, Carrie. 'Calling People Names: Reading Imposture, Confession, and Testimony in and after Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*.' *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Vol. 25, No. 2. Pp 50-73.

described as “the tension between the desire for the restitution of stable identities, on the one hand, and the author’s determination to provoke but not meet that desire” (68), expressed via Almásy’s urge to finally claim modernist ownership in the exact instance that required postmodernist obscurity, foreshadowed by the cautionary story of Candaules and his queen.

Resonating with the half-verified, vague accounts offered by Almásy, Herodotus’ version of history is formed from a mixture of imagined and factual events, the written product of which occupies a fundamental position in the progression of identity in *The English Patient*. Herodotus’ questionably truthful *The Histories* becomes Almásy’s sole touchstone, and a symbol of Almásy’s dual need for direction and oblivion; he finds that he seeks tangible information, “often open[ing] Herodotus for a clue to geography” (247), while simultaneously becoming entranced by the writer’s ability to convey precise accounts of the private, unwitnessed ‘cul-de-sacs’ of history. The recited story which becomes central to the love affair of *The English Patient* amounts to Herodotus’ version of a morality tale, yet a characteristically vague message regarding Almásy and Katharine emerges from the story of King Candaules, who is so proud of his wife’s beauty that he convinces his favourite spearman, Gyges, to gaze upon her naked without his wife’s knowledge. Finding out about the slight on her reputation, the queen tells Gyges he must either kill the King and possess her, or kill himself, “so the king is killed. A New Age begins” (248). Musing upon the pervading ambiguity of the desert, Almásy merges the story into reality by noting that although “this was in no way a portrait of Clifton...he became part of this

story" (248); thus, the recitation emphasises the queen's experience under the reign of an adoring yet modernly possessive husband, as Katharine's voice becomes "wary as she read...as if she were sinking within quicksand while she spoke" (247). The surface parallel of Almásy and Katharine with Gyges and his queen is clear, yet also holds a deeper resonance with the modern-postmodern tension of the novel within its plot; while the queen remains unnamed throughout, referred to only by her title or as Candaules' wife, Katharine has now attained a name and the associated degree of autonomy, evolving away from her husband "so power changed hands" (249) yet eventually desires the same level of modernist revelation and security from Almásy, just as the queen redeems her identity and esteem by forcing Gyges to assume the role of her husband. The inherent suggestion that all relationships ultimately revert to a form of modernism, even if the union is conceived through a postmodernist defiance of the sanctity of traditional marriage, is a fascinatingly fatalistic view of Almásy and Katharine's affair that is reinforced by Katharine's abandonment of Almásy when she realises he will not provide the certainty she requires, with Katharine admitting "I left you because I knew I could never change you" (185). The book thus manifests the ideological struggle which consumes Almásy: a blended text which suggests a warning against pride in modernist ownership, while also compelling Almásy to assume the role of Gyges in Katharine Clifton's marriage, "having translated her strangely into my text of the desert" (250).

The combative approach with which Katharine and Almásy adopt each side of the modern-postmodern divide, respectively, is therefore problematically

foreshadowed by Herodotus' retelling of Candaules, with the narrative seemingly urging Katharine towards a Gyges who is not so driven by possessive pride, yet it is precisely this modernist attitude that she tries to instill in Almásy, culminating in a tragically ironic outcome when he finally gives her the security she desires by naming her as his wife when seeking help. The postmodernist obscurity, which shielded him from discovery in the desert, is abandoned as Almásy reaches El Taj, finally succumbing to the urge to shout aloud the modernist symbols of his life - his love and his exact desert mapping: "yelling Katharine's name. Yelling the Gilf Kebir. Whereas the only name I should have yelled, dropped like a calling card into their hands, was Clifton's" (267).

By threading the story of Candaules through the fabric of Almásy and Katharine's affair, Ondaatje manufactures a complex weave of modern traditionalism and postmodern escape, portraying the confines and arrogance of a modernist marriage yet also illustrating the power of a name in the town of El Taj where a foreigner emerging from the desert without a name is assumed to be "just another possible second-rate spy. Just another international bastard" (267). The queen's response is problematic, as the novel seemingly suggests Katharine's attraction to Almásy stems from a desire to re-create the modernity of her marriage within their affair, attempting to lure Almásy towards her side of the ideological span. Alternately, the novel's representation of Almásy as Gyges implies he must take a possessive modernist action to win Katharine, yet when Almásy enters El Taj after years spent hiding his identity as "a vacuum on the charts" (269) of Intelligence, his eventual swerve into modernist ownership

occurs precisely when he should have retained his postmodern mystery, with his step towards modernism meaning he “didn’t give them the right name....The name of her husband” (266). Via the modernist message of Candaules’ story and the postmodernist leaning of Almásy’s failure to gain assistance when he surrenders to the modern order of identity but misnames, the novel assumes a deliberately neutral stance on the tensions that drive characters’ identity development, offering contradictory sentiments with very little resolution. This suggests that Ondaatje wishes to use alternating cautionary imagery for both modernism and postmodernism, to evade a clear resolution in favour of emphasising the inadequacy of either ideology as a sole source of authentic identity, through characters that are oppositional, blended, and complex reactionary products of their society. Seeking to express the varying role that modernism and postmodernism play in individual identity formation and progression, *The English Patient* thus depicts Almásy and Kirpal as vulnerable buoys in a fluctuating tide that wrenches their perspective towards alternating ends of the spectrum, while in contrast, Katharine remains seemingly anchored by the modernist society of her upbringing.

### **The Unravelling Modernity of Madox**

The text’s apparent refusal to conclusively reconcile the alternating imagery of modernist mapping, postmodernist landscape, modernist naming and its failure at El Taj is further emphasised by the inclusion of the character of Madox, Almásy’s desert companion. A direct dogmatic rival and as close a friend as Almásy is capable of, Madox is depicted as a character of entrenched

modernist perspective throughout most of the narrative, a man who believes in the sanctity of national identity, unable to withstand the loss he encounters upon returning to the traditionally tranquil England he reveres to find its idealised order has been destroyed in the name of modernist conflict.

The novel positions Madox as the stalwart of traditional modernism for much of the narrative, acting as the sole, clear counter to Almásy's postmodernity when Katharine obfuscates her ordered ideological outlook with an extra-marital affair. While Almásy muses that "seas move away, why not lovers?....The wife of Candaules becomes the wife of Gyges" (253), the text places Madox as the statically oppositional, balancing figure, expressing the counter-sentiment that Gyges could indeed have chosen to sacrifice himself instead of killing the king, and as a modernist symbol of transparent morality in the desert. Telling Madox he is courting a widow in Cairo to explain his absence, Almásy always feels "more of a deceiver with him, this friend I had worked with for ten years, this man I loved more than any other man" (254), showing the novel's classification of Madox as a conventional modernist who seemingly stirs a sense of mingled regret and guilt in the postmodernist Almásy. Although they "were utterly unlike each other" (255), Almásy seems to admire Madox's conviction in defined behaviour and firm borders, a security which grants Madox "a sense of calmness in all things" (257), until his ordered existence is later demolished by the devastating impact of the modernist war effort in Marston Magna. The novel thus casts Madox as the personification of a modernist sense of national identity, symbolic of the role lineage and familiarity play in defining nationality and the associated

implication that borders validate any conflict that is required to protect these modernist inventions. The novel's emphasis upon the desert explorer's love of England and the defined national culture this represents means he effectively becomes the textual link between the shifting landscape of Libya and modernist ideas of nationality during conflict, conveyed by an initial contrast between the fluctuating sands and an anchored ideal rooted in the soil of Somerset, before ultimately employing him as a representation of the modern-postmodern collision of nationality and conflict.

Despite suggesting that Madox is a man who wanted to have both sides of the ideological divide, with the text describing him as having "altered all customs and habits so he can have the proximity to sea level as well as regular dryness" (172), Madox is largely portrayed as a fundamentally English man who enters the desert for the advancement of England, who garners an established sense of self from tradition and heritage as "an aristocrat with a past of regimental associations" (251), and who wears an identity so secured by nationality it means Katharine can easily "twist a few degrees and see the labels on Madox" (245). It is this convinced nationality which proves the basis of his tragic epiphany when the modernist conventions in which he placed so much faith disintegrate under the weight of protecting the borders that construct a nation.

Unsettling his belief in the validity of nationhood as an underlying reason for conflict, the text abruptly alters Madox's ideological positioning when he returns to Somerset to find the town has "turned its green fields into an aerodrome" (256), while "planes burned their exhaust over Arthurian castles"

(256). Where Almásy's lack of belief in a secure identity allows him to adjust to “the shifting and temporary vetoes of war” (256), the text expresses the vulnerability of Madox's modernist outlook when he is unable to accept that “someone's war was slashing apart his delicate tapestry” (256), as the life he has painstakingly assembled is annihilated in defence of the beloved modernism which “had now turned out to be the enemy” (256). Madox therefore becomes the novel's image of the futility of nationhood as singular and idealised, reiterating the sentiment that resonated throughout the desert explorations as an image of the senseless divides that borders inflict upon humanity. The text's placement of Madox is later emphasised by Almásy's loathing for the vain demarcations reflected by the novel's portrayal of national boundaries and the pain they inflict: “We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations” (147).

The highly ambiguous blend of modern and postmodern imagery in *The English Patient* seems to deliberately forbid any comfortable conclusion regarding the text's ideological stance, and instead offers merely a mosaic of contradictory experience through the characters of Almásy, Madox, and Kirpal. The postmodernist Almásy is lured towards a modernist ownership yet embraces modernism only when it is precisely mistaken to do so, suggesting the criticality of altering one's ideological outlook to suit the situation rather than assuming an inflexible single stance, reiterated in Madox's inability to cope once the foundations of his committed beliefs are degraded. *The English Patient*'s representation of the collision between the comforting ideals of modernist nationality and the harsh conflict such nationhood requires is the ultimate

manifestation of the modern-postmodern tension which threads throughout the novel, expressed in Almásy's simultaneous desire for knowledge, ownership and anonymity, and the false strength of Madox's entrenched modernist nationality, which leaves him in fatal despair when the facade is shattered. The struggle between these simultaneously compelling yet opposing ideologies motivates Almásy to mistakenly name Katharine as his wife, and drives a disillusioned modernist Madox, listening in church as a "priest intoned blithely about battle, blessing the government and the men about to enter the war" (257), to perceive of such futility that he took "the desert pistol, bent over and shot himself in the heart" (257). In a novel of clashing ideology and desperately divergent ideals, the text ultimately suggests there is a certain sanctity in the unresolved tidal pull which drives and shunts the characters from one end of the spectrum to the other. Like "some European words you can never translate properly into another language" (182), the resolution of the modern-postmodern tension becomes, for these characters, as ambiguous as "*Félhomály*. The dusk of graves. With the connotation of intimacy there between the dead and the living" (182). This sense of blended ambiguity is conveyed through the quasi-existence of life as a desert explorer and the contrasting marked fields of Somerset, showing the divergent nature of each and yet how one may compulsively seek a feeling of establishment in both the fluctuating landscape of Libya and the modernist, quilted expanses of Somerset. The text refuses to state definitively whether the desire for modernist demarcation actually brings about the breakdown of the romanticized society (as it does in Somerset), and similarly evades resolving the repercussions of

attempting to map the desert, expressed by Almásy's unanswered lament: "Had I been her demon lover? Had I been Madox's demon friend? This country – had I charted it and turned it into a place of war?" (276). As Longley notes, *The English Patient*'s interplay of modern and postmodern, past and present, defined and unfixable offers no scope for comfortable conclusion, presenting "the process of recoding and remapping histories, both personal and national...in terms of mirages and hallucinations playing against a backdrop of shifting desert sand" (20). The implication that "there is God only in the desert..." (265) suggests the failure of modernism to fulfill and protect the very bordered societies it creates outside the desert, and perhaps also the senselessness of attempting to impose boundaries between the modern and the creeping postmodernist world of the desert. This sense of merging worlds means that although beyond the Libyan sands "there was just trade and power, money and war" (265), within the desert there really exists only a self-reflexive escape into oblivion, where "we are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience" (277). Desiring only the freedom on walking "upon such an earth that had no maps" (277), *The English Patient*'s only semblance of resolution suggests the futility of attempting to segregate the world into a map-less expanse on the one hand and a known modernist entity on the other, since the two are inextricably linked as much in Libya as in an Italian Villa. For the novel recognises that "the past...is perpetually invading the present and having a central place in it day by day, not as an aspect of 'somewhere else' but as an ongoing aspect of living in the here and now" (20).

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## **Chapter Four**

### **'Past and Present, East and West: Representations of the Modern-Postmodern Tension in *Anil's Ghost*'**

In contrast to the mood of vacillation which permeates *The English Patient* through a hazy blend of modern and postmodern imagery, *Anil's Ghost* adopts a comparatively concise and distinct approach to this ideological tension. Set amongst the paralyzing uncertainty that follows the Sri Lankan civil war, Ondaatje's 2000 novel nonetheless allows a relatively transparently representation of its key themes through a clear combination of landscape, naming, and scientific imagery. Where *The English Patient* offered only transitory messages that required the reader to decipher glimpses of modernist assurance amongst narrative fissures and disruptive recollections, *Anil's Ghost* quickly positions its subjects and motivations, expressing shades of modernist and postmodernist outlooks through Western-Eastern transnationality, cultural autonomy, and authentic identity by Anil's determined pursuit of a sole victim's name. The modernist elements seemingly run parallel to and unmingled with the prevalent postmodernity of the Sri Lankan environment for much of the novel, allowing issues of forensic truth in an oppressed society and genuine identity in the age of global citizenship to develop undiluted, expressing the ideological duality in dramatic contrast.

### **Aspects of the Postcolonial in *Anil's Ghost***

When considering how *Anil's Ghost* conveys aspects of the modern and postmodern through its imagery, and how the text portrays the convergence and divergence of these two components, it is also critical to consider a third, fundamental aspect: what are the beneficial implications, if any, of exploring the novel through a modern-postmodern rather than a colonial-postcolonial framework? This thesis shall explore how the imagery of *Anil's Ghost* constitutes a literary manifestation of the modern-postmodernist tension, an examination which utilizes and relies upon the key concepts of previous postcolonial research in this area. Such criticism streamlined the analytical process by validating and exploring the development of this genre, making the significant insights which this reading now seeks to build upon.

*Anil's Ghost* can be considered a thoroughly postcolonial text, in the sense that it exhibits the critical literary characteristics of the genre which, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin<sup>57</sup> note, were created when authors emerged “out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre” (2). The avant-garde product of this literary progression unsettled existing ideas of critical analysis, meaning that “theories of style and genre, assumptions about the universal features of language, epistemologies and value systems” have all been “radically questioned by the practices of post-colonial writing” (4). This challenge

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<sup>57</sup> Ashcroft, Bill. Griffiths, Gareth. Tiffin, Helen. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London and New York Routledge, 1989.

encapsulates the paradoxical element of colonization and the resulting rise of post-colonial literature and critical theory, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin note, in that such “imperial expansion has had a radically destabilizing effect on its own preoccupations and power” (4) also. This means that the “alienating process” of colonization which sought to “relegate the post-colonial world to the ‘margin’ [has now] turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic and multifarious” (4). Postcolonial literature may therefore be read as a reflexive literary product as well as mutually influential genre, subverting, and subverted by, ideas of Western and Eastern divergence and the need for a discourse to emerge unmitigated by colonial oppression. These components of postcolonial study clearly resonate with some ideological elements of a modern-postmodern framework, forming an overlapping region in which the latter critical approach seemingly adopts a great deal of concepts from the former. However, although the postcolonial analysis of *Anil's Ghost* stands as a robust and valid form of criticism, a modern-postmodern approach adds a new angle by employing the rights which were primarily founded by postcolonial theory: in particular, the freedom to interpret literature through an alternate lens.

#### **Modern-Postmodern Explorations of *Anil's Ghost***

The representation of the modern-postmodern tension in *Anil's Ghost* draws upon ideas of the postcolonial, expressing the impact of combative civil conflict upon Sri Lankan life and the lingering effects of displaced discourse and imperial oppression. The postcolonial approach differs from the modern-

postmodern, Cameron Richards<sup>58</sup> notes, through the former's assumption "that the corresponding trajectories of colonizer and colonized are not symmetrical" (66): this assumption suggests that the postcolonial perceives the colonial viewpoint as holding a palpable advantage, and thus this form of criticism resolutely focuses upon, Tiffin notes, unmasking European authority", while by comparison, a modern-postmodern approach expands this to explore the masking and unmasking of all authority. This effectively widens the scope of an examination of *Anil's Ghost* to analyze how the modern and postmodern mutually interact and oppose one another, rather than assuming the modern holds an intrinsically powerful position. This allows an exploration of how Anil's adoption of Western authority, the authoritative role of modernist ideas of truth, and the impact of nationality upon identity combine and fuse, whether from a Western or Sri Lankan perspective. This means a modern-postmodern framework may cover a broader range of comparative analysis than the postcolonial, further exposing the imagery of *Anil's Ghost* and its representations of truth and identity as, Richards notes, where "postcolonialism presupposes a geographical trajectory (whether imaginary or real) [grounded in the] trajectory of history in local, specific contexts of cultural transformation in the conventional or exemplary rather than privileged sense", postmodernism instead "tends to be located as a spatial, ahistorical trajectory of global cultural autonomy and displacement" (66). Therefore, exploring the imagery of *Anil's Ghost* as representative of a modern-postmodern

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<sup>58</sup> Richards, Cameron. 'Postmodernism or Postcolonialism Tomorrow: the relevance of a dialogical framework for postcolonial criticism'. *Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*, No. 36 (October 1993). Pp. 65-74.

tension does take a more abstracted view than a postcolonial examination, yet this may also add a wider analysis to existing close postcolonial readings of the novel.

### **‘One American Bird’: Representations of Modernity and Postmodernity in the Landscape Imagery of *Anil’s Ghost***

From the novel’s opening pages, Anil’s ‘Western’ assumptions that intellectual freedom means any “information could always be clarified and acted upon” (54) are immediately exposed as outlandish beliefs in a nation terrorized by hidden civil warfare, an “unofficial war” (17) which remains unreported in Western media because “no one wants to alienate the foreign powers” (17). Anil’s comfortable Western lifestyle thus quickly creates a jarring contrast with the reality of the Sri Lankan existence: the ease with which Anil navigates “the Bakerloo line or the highways around Santa Fe” (25) shows how accustomed she is to the familiar securities of established modern society, while her faith in the legitimacy of the Sri Lankan Government also conveys the utter disparity between the West’s safety and the uncertainty of a nation where violence is inflicted “by the insurgents, or by the government or the guerilla separatists. Murders committed by all sides” (18). The text therefore firmly establishes the West – with its belief in scientific investigation and assured intellectual safety – as the symbol of modernist order, in sharp contrast to the Sri Lankan environment of dynamic, unsecured life, where “there was always a racket. Birds, lorries, fighting dogs...all their sounds entering through open windows” (140), emphasising that there is “no chance of an ivory tower existing in the tropics” (140). These separated aspects do eventually collide as the novel progresses, yet the clear

demarcation between modern and postmodern imagery ensures that the two worlds remain predominantly independent of one another throughout. Allowing only a slight intermingling near the novel's end, the two spheres revert to mutual isolation as Anil departs for the West with a hurried re-written report in her possession, while Gamini remains in the frenetic milieu of a Sri Lankan hospital to mourn Sarath's death. Therefore, unlike the ambiguous ideological blend which remains undefined at the close of *The English Patient*, this text's clear distinctions form a relatively resolved – if not particularly positive – and cohesive conclusion which continues to pose the realities of modernity and postmodernity in a starkly oppositional manner when Anil leaves Sri Lanka, presumably forever.

The novel's use of vivid landscape imagery to depict the Sri Lankan environment establishes the Asian nation as a symbol of postmodernist sensibilities, with the text's description of natural disorder creating a binary contrast between the West's "clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries" (54) and the raw chaos of Sri Lanka's diverse lands. Although the National Atlas containing "seventy-three versions of the island" (39) which express "one aspect...rainfall, winds, surface waters of lakes, rarer bodies of water locked deep within the earth" (39), its human core remains obscured beneath arbitrary facts as the map fails to reveal any defined, written trace of humanity: "no city names....no river names. No depiction of human life" (40). The continued suffering of this postmodern nation thus resonates through the text's description of landscape rather than documented crimes, with the novel expressing the human toll the National Atlas does not through images of

destroyed tranquility, defaced Buddhist cave temples where thieves have removed the panorama of Bodhisattvas, “cut out of the walls with axes and saws, the edges red, suggesting the wound’s incision” (12). This use of landscape imagery conveys the effects of such a postmodern conflict upon Sri Lankan society, expressing a sense of the endless agony of unrecognized crimes against humanity and the immobilizing period of infinite mourning which leaves victims stranded in memories and unable to find “the old road back into the world” (277). It is this repetitive, static suffering which Nicola King<sup>59</sup> regards as the key element of the postmodern, noting the disorientating dilemma of possessing the ability to both “recognize ‘that mourning is in error’” yet also “be nevertheless condemned to mourn; to be unable to remember the transcendental ground that would once again give meaning to human language and experience” (King, 28). King’s sentiment resonates through *Anil’s Ghost*’s depiction of the Sri Lankan landscape as an environment of temporary reprieve in which safety is inherently fleeting and utterly fragile. This echoes in the description of the capricious natural elements, which mean the “smell of dust in the wetness” (15) that signals the start of the monsoon season and transforms the fractured city into “an intimate village full of people acknowledging the rain and yelling to one another” (15). Although the novel presents the start of monsoon with celebratory imagery, a lingering hesitancy still remains as people temper their excitement with the knowledge that such happiness could prove pre-emptive. This double-edged nature of the landscape parallels King’s description of the duality of postmodern mourning, as

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<sup>59</sup> With reference to Ned Lukacher’s work, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

this abrupt and joyful metamorphosis is undercut by an ever-present underlying air of caution, meaning that beneath their delight Sri Lankans retain a simultaneous sense of “uncertain acceptance of the rain in case it was only a brief shower” (15).

The juxtaposition of the Western and Eastern landscapes in the novel becomes representative of the contrasting ideological outlook in each global zone, posing modernism against disordered postmodernism through Anil’s observation, experience and recollection of each environment. Ensconcing herself in the anonymity of the West, Anil feels free to gradually re-create herself without the confines of familial expectations, stoically planting herself in the isolated Southwest towns of the United States, where “you needed to look twice at emptiness, you needed to take your time” (148) since “things grew only with difficulty” (148). The modernist detachment of this landscape suits Anil’s personality as a solitary figure who, like the American native plant which emitted toxicity when it rained “to keep away anything that tried to grow too near it” (149), is similarly focused on privacy as a tool of self-preservation, deliberately maintaining her personal space just as the plant’s poison “reserved the small area around it for its own water supply” (149). By contrast, the Sri Lankan landscape evokes only the slightest emotion in Anil, merely a tiny twinge buried within like the faded cotton thread of ‘protection’ “tied on during a friend’s *pirith* ceremony” (19), whose lost pigmentation fades further under the opaqueness of Anil’s laboratory glove, “as if within ice” (19). These fragments of Sri Lankan customs are the only traces that remain with Anil – no longer receiving even the token gift

of a new sarong every Christmas now that her parents have died – rendering her a thoroughly removed global citizen who has now “lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze” (11). The novel thus presents Anil’s identity as firmly rooted in the West, reflected in the disproportionate comfort she finds in one piece of mail and a short, impersonal phone call from her American friend, Leaf. That a weakening relationship with a woman suffering from Alzheimer disease reassures Anil more than her return to postmodern Sri Lanka shows with “one postcard from Leaf. One American bird” (29), that Anil’s allegiance remains with the modernist West.

An uneasy and detached interdependency between the modernist nations of the West and the comparatively postmodernist style of the East emanates through *Anil's Ghost*, emphasising the problematic divergence that faces those who attempt to bridge such a complex divide. The novel reflects this difficulty through Anil’s one-dimensional, unmingled identity, through which she exhibits firmly Western notions to exclusion of her Sri Lankan heritage. The text emphasises how Anil’s closed, modernist nature prohibits the possibility of a mixed-allegiance identity, portraying this as stemming from her lack of familial ties in Sri Lanka and thus implying the powerful role which family plays in maintaining the birth nation connection that forms one segment of a trans-national identity. Bearing resemblance to *The English Patient*’s depiction of the Singh family, Anil stages an occupational rebellion similar to that of Kirpal by opting to study forensics rather than following her father into medicine, belatedly musing that she “didn’t want to be him at that time” (47). This resonates with Sarath’s

decision not to join the family law firm, just as his brother Gamini “also betrayed those voices in the house and entered medical school” (215). Although on a surface reading these disruptive choices suggest a swerve into postmodernist disorder – by disobeying established traditions - they actually convey an adult child’s movement towards modernism: in veering away from these conventionally imposed professions, the characters of *Anil’s Ghost* instill a fragment of modernist privacy into their lives and gain a level of anonymity which is impossible in the interlinked closeness of postmodernist Sri Lankan society. However, while Sarath and Gamini make an ambivalent movement which therefore retains their inherent postmodernist outlook, by avoiding a modernist occupation yet remaining in Sri Lanka, Anil makes a seemingly deliberate choice to not only shuck off her father’s profession but his nation too, making her the modernist counter to Sarath and Gamini’s postmodernist blend. The sense of private, independent endeavour not only distances children from their immediate families but also from the traditional hierarchy of their birth nation. Firmly aligning each character with self-chosen values rather than those of their parents, unlike *The English Patient* this novel suggests the fissure of the modern-postmodern dilemma necessitates a decisive movement like Anil’s: Kirpal’s ultimate return to India as a doctor represents a quasi-acceptance of his familial role on his own terms, while Anil’s attempt to combine the two realms instead results in her definitive movement back into the modernism of the West. Maintaining Anil’s insular detachment from the family structure, *Anil’s Ghost* conveys this choice as a vital binary decision, representing the incompatible juxtaposition of modernism and postmodernism

through Anil's marriage to a fellow Sri Lankan to whom she could "whisper her desire for jaggery or jakfruit and be understood" (141). Their union, born of a mingled yearning for the East and a desire to escape it, represents the trial of Anil's choice, and ferments the diasporic struggle to exist both within and outside Sri Lanka, ultimately leaving her firmly in the West.

The period following Anil's parents' death and divorce from a fellow Sri Lankan is critical in the entrenchment of the modernist perspective which roots her to the West. It is during this upheaval that the modern-postmodern tension inherent to her Western lifestyle veers and unsettles, before ultimately solidifying into a modernist outlook. A total detachment from Sri Lanka means Anil eventually envelops herself in an existence outside the family order in which "most people know every meeting you have during the day" (138), thus carving out a modernist identity which acknowledges her origin yet forbids its influence from seeping into her adopted life. The consciousness of this decision underpins the clarity of *Anil's Ghost*, as the novel presents a resolved image of the characteristically ambiguous themes of trans-nationality and the modern-postmodern struggle for identity. Rather than slipping into the self-reflexivity and malleability of *The English Patient*, *Anil's Ghost* conveys a clear sense of both origin and destination, and the need to test the strength of these boundaries before committing allegiance to one side. This approach creates the robust, modern diaspora Makarand Paranjape<sup>60</sup> describes as consisting of "a source country and a target country, source culture and a target culture" (67), meaning that to produce a

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<sup>60</sup> Paranjape, Makarand. 'Displaced Relations: Diasporas, Empires, Homelands.' *CRNLE Journal*, 2000, Pp. 64-72.

secure identity, this crossing of the modern-postmodern chasm must “even if voluntary...involve some significant tension between the source and target cultures” (67). The competition of the modern and postmodern is evident throughout the novel’s account of Anil’s marriage to a man who viewed their wedding as “another excuse for a party that would bond them all” (142). Seemingly intent upon merging Sri Lanka into their Western life, Anil’s husband operates without the boundaries she requires, emerging as a problematic blended identity who discerns no difference “between privacy and friendship with acquaintances” (143). This lack of distinct spheres and the tendency to “spend all his spare energy on empathy” (143) reinforces the clinical aspects of Anil’s personality, meaning she “never trusted weepers after that” (143) and immerses herself in the modernism of her adopted existence where “she no longer spoke Sinhala to anyone”, now “turned fully to the place she found herself in” (145). Having survived the identity trial of her divorce, Anil discards the blended heritage which unsettles her; just as Sarath cannot comfortably acknowledge the existence of his duplicitous brother, Anil excises the facet of herself which she could “never relax or feel secure with”, with both characters thus choosing to overlook their respective “unhappy shadows” (288). Anil’s attempt to create a modernist self is thus forged by her failed marriage, her voluntary movement solidified by resisting the lure of familiar culture in a hostile and unknown environment.

In her description of the representation of international diaspora in *Anil's Ghost*, Heike Härtung<sup>61</sup> describes a multi-faceted sensation of being “at once cosmopolitan and particularist, transnational and nationalist” (45), rotating around the idea of the centrifugal ‘homeland’ which is inherently unsatisfying, as it “neither equals anti-modernist traditionalism nor provides a source of romantic liberation ideologies” (44). Therefore, to interpret Anil’s return to Sri Lanka as a return to a comforting, idealised ‘homeland’ overstates the actions of a forensic scientist who merely views the trip as a response to an organizational requirement, entering a “halfhearted” (15) application that implies a sense of modernist obligation rather than any deep urge to rediscover the birth nation from which she has deliberately distanced herself. This complete, self-imposed exile sees the novel emphasise Anil’s ‘Westernism’ through the reactions of other Sri Lankans rather than her own observations, which allows only a tiny degree of self-awareness to emerge in Anil’s definitive statement that she is “not a prodigal” (10). It is therefore through a dismissive response when asked if she still speaks Sinhala, and Dr. Perera’s assertion that her “dress is Western, I see” (26), that we may gauge Anil’s clear modernist positioning within the novel, a deliberate separation which highlights Anil’s utter distance from Sri Lankan culture, and allows each ideological thread to develop unmitigated.

*Anil's Ghost*’s expression of the abrupt change in season which means “earth turned to mud around them” (15), offers a parallel between the natural and political moods of Sri Lanka, both spheres seemingly at the mercy of decisions

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<sup>61</sup> Härtung, Heike. ‘Diasporic Cross-Currents in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* and Anita Rau Badami’s *The Hero’s Walk*’. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 1. Pp 43-70.

made outside Sri Lankan control. The environment, which is so dramatically altered by unpredictable meteorological movements, thus parallels the power of external Western media judgments, which wield a formidable influence over the Sri Lankan politics by partially fuelling randomized violence which occurs at sporadic intervals, and controlling the discourse of war by overriding domestic accounts in the media. This oppression of Sri Lankan voices creates a painful divide between the dominant Western news network perspective and the grass-roots reality of conflict, with global media possessing the power to claim the authoritative viewpoint. Noting that the “Hundred Years’ War” (43) is predominantly motivated and sustained by the West, *Anil’s Ghost* therefore expresses the chasm between the causes and effects of civil conflict through the modern-postmodern, Western-Eastern dichotomy, emphasising the Sri Lankan perspective in a war supplied by the “backers on the sidelines in safe countries” (43) who benefit so greatly from financial arms deals that the underlying cause of conflict has become irrelevant, since now, “*the reason for war was war*” (43). This arroyo winds throughout the novel, shown in the contrast between the autonomous Western ability to freely relay their version of the truth, and the disempowerment of the Sri Lankan people, subjugated to the point where their account now only counts if validated by Western media.

#### **Representations of West and East, Modernity and Postmodernity, through Forensic Imagery in *Anil’s Ghost***

The novel’s sense of an empty ‘home-coming’ devoid of any meaningful sentiment emerges primarily through Anil’s forensic work rather than any

particularly emotive recollections from the woman herself, with the novel placing her in the unenviable position of an ‘imported’ foreign expert who attracts the defensive vitriol of domestic professionals long-accustomed to the superior attitude of visiting Westerners. This divide between the professionals is arbitrary, since both groups possess rarefied levels of education, yet it clearly becomes symbolic of the Western-Eastern tension that resonates throughout the novel. Thus, when asked to give an educational speech on Sri Lankan snakebites, in which “the choice of subject [is] intentional...to level the playing field between the foreign-trained and the locally-trained” (25), Anil is acutely aware it is her alien credentials which are really under evaluation. Similarly, domestic professionals interpret Anil’s unwillingness to obey censorship as a sign of modernist ignorance in a postmodern, war-plagued society. What is perceived as arrogant obliviousness, the novel suggests, constitutes the worst form of Western oppression, in effectively barring the Sri Lankan discourse in favour of a detached, dehumanized account of the postmodern world through blinkered modernist eyes. The disinterested glory-seeking of Western media who travel to Sri Lanka simply to “slip in, make a discovery and leave” (44) emphasises the novel’s representation of the modern-postmodern tension as the struggle between the Western and Eastern viewpoints. Thus, Anil’s expert opinion is deemed uninformed and irrelevant, placed alongside the misleading coverage produced by “those journalists who file reports about flies and scabs while staying at the Galle Face Hotel” (44). Within this feudal resentment, however, a paradoxical reliance upon the West remains: although misrepresented and usurped by the Western

viewpoint, Sri Lankans must reluctantly acknowledge that the “false empathy and blame” (44) administered by the West remain the only available vehicles for a domestic war discourse.

Through its use of scientific imagery, *Anil's Ghost* represents the collision of the West’s modernist urge to classify the indeterminate with the inherent ‘grey-zone’ of information particular to the postmodernity of civil war. Thus, the insidious fear of the truth that creeps through Sri Lanka - seemingly imperceptible to, or overlooked by, modernist Western eyes - is expressed through references to an obscure “knot of fibres made up of nerve cells” (134) known as the *Amygdala*. Described as the “dark aspect of the brain....A place to house fearful memories” (134), this location in the mind “specializes in fear” (134) and notably carries a title which “sounded Sri Lankan when Anil first heard it” (134). Through this tiny yet fundamental segment of the brain, the text conveys the underlying contrast between the Western and Eastern attitude towards truth: posing the modernist assumption of a right to discourse against the nerve bundle with the Sri Lankan-sounding name which “houses fear – so it governs everything” (135), the novel concisely names the source of Sarath’s fear of identifying a government-murdered victim, as the overworked Sri Lankan *amygdala* leaves truth “broken by just the possibility of what might happen” (135). The novel’s reflection of the modern-postmodern tension through such scientific imagery offers a moderation of its divisive representation of the two approaches, yet without delving into the ambiguity portrayed in *The English Patient*: positioning Anil alongside the modernist methods of forensics and Sarath with the postmodernist, human side of

science, the novel suggests that although modernism and postmodernism's diverse elements keep them in separate realms, they are nonetheless vitally interdependent in attaining a truth formed of both factual evidence and human discourse. Therefore, although the characters' fundamental outlooks remain unchanged at the novel's conclusion, a sense of mutual respect develops as the text progresses in spite of the still contrasting opinions which mean "Anil looks for permanent truths in the chemical traces that survive in bones"<sup>62</sup> (307) and "Sarah insists that truth is inseparable from life" (307) since in Sri Lanka, "for the living" (259), truth lies simply in "character and nuance and mood" (259). Maintaining its segregated tone, the novel's movement towards limited ideological collusion represents merely an awareness of the duality of truth, as Anil begins to understand the delicate trade-off between exposing the modernist truth of the past and maintaining the tenuous postmodern peace of the present. Though her love of defined information means she still "would not understand this old and accepted balance" (156), by the text's conclusion she has gained a partial appreciation of the impact upon Sri Lanka when the truth is "broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside some irrelevant photographs" (156). Through this expression of the duality of scientific and truth imagery, the novel attains a sophisticated balance of the modern and postmodern, each element separated, harmonizing Anil's recognition that such a "flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead...to new vengeance and slaughter" (156-157) with Sarah's utterly selfless sacrifice in the name of a modernist truth.

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<sup>62</sup> Scanlan, Margaret. 'Anil's Ghost and Terrorism's Time'. Studies in the Novel, Vol. 36, No. 3, Fall 2004. Pp 302-317.

Although as this novel progresses it develops a mitigated depiction of the modern and postmodern as distinct yet interlocking parts, the incompatible opinions of Western and Eastern scientists remain, particularly regarding the very existence of truth as Sarath's belief that clarity is not "necessarily truth. It's simplicity" (259), a belief that utterly invalidates Anil's determination to condense the civil war's worth of victims down to the single name of Ruwan Kumara. This juxtaposition shows how *Anil's Ghost* continues to channel the modern-postmodern tension through an expression of diverging scientific perspectives – Anil is naturally placed as the factual Western modernist, while Sarath and Palipana represent the role of subjectivity within science, by balancing the biological evidence with the personalised realm of facial re-constructions to emphasise how both facts and human recollections are needed to form a cohesive truth. Their contrasting approaches resonate through each aspect of their collaborative research, with Anil's misfitting modernist assumptions reinforcing Paranjape's observation that the difficulty with trying to decipher the "interpenetrations" (68) of the West and East is that "we don't have a word to describe former empires which must now play host to their colonial chickens who have come home to roost" (68). Anil's belief that cataloguing forensic details creates a direct route to the truth jars with Sarath's experience of the Sri Lankan system in which "there was nothing to believe with certainty" (103) since "we have never had the truth. Not even with your work on bones" (103). These diverging notions of facts and freedoms expose the safety of the West and the transitory nature of peace in the East, further emphasised by the contrast between

Anil's casual remark that "secrets turn powerless in the open air" (259) and Sarah's innate awareness that "political secrets are not powerless, in any form" (259).

### **Naming and Identity Imagery in *Anil's Ghost***

A sense of incomplete knowledge emanates from the modernist forensic imagery of *Anil's Ghost*, reinforcing the interdependency of the objective and subjective by offering a series of tiny clues that culminate in a confirmed account of the final minutes of the corpse's life, whom Anil temporarily nicknames 'Sailor' until it is identified as Ruwan Kumara. Uncovering Sailor's age exposes only a fragment of the whole truth, allowing a glimpse as forensics reveal he is twenty-eight years old yet withholding the pivotal fact of "*when* he was twenty-eight years old" (96), which would enable someone to positively identify him. The 'total' truth therefore lies in a coalition of the West and the East, since Sailor's identification hinges upon a human recognition, and the factual evidence only holds genuine power if communicated to those who rule the modernist media arena of the West. The Sri Lankan professional retaliation Anil experiences thus surges from this grief of being overlooked by Western ignorance, and a resentment at the modernist opinions of a society which "wouldn't have survived with...rules of Westminster then" (154), with foreigners simply unable to comprehend "how bad things were...the law abandoned by everyone...terror everywhere, from all sides" (153-154). Palipana's staunch view of "Europe as simply a landmass on the end of the peninsula of Asia" (79), expresses this domestic refusal to diffuse information through a Western filter, an attempt to

counter the narrow foreign view of “Asian history as a faint horizon where Europe joined the East” (79). Having “wrestled archaeological authority in Sri Lanka away from the Europeans” (79), such defiance therefore comes to symbolise the duality of modern and postmodern imagery in the novel’s representation of scientific imagery, offering balance to Anil’s view of modernist facts, and emphasising the humanist, postmodern element of the quest to find Sailor’s identity.

The contrasting aspects of modernist forensics and postmodernist human discourse compete with, and eventually complement, each other in the pursuit of Sailor’s identity, creating a multi-faceted truth that resonates in both realms of the ideological divide which drives *Anil’s Ghost*. This accord is a blend of scientific accuracy and an understanding of the postmodern uncertainty which threads throughout Sri Lanka, creating a quilted product of modernist endeavour and respectful restraint. The novel expresses this dual perspective through the intricate skills of traditional carving, an inherited Sri Lankan technique which still flounders under the oppressive “authority and guidance of foreign specialists” (301) even though “in the end these celebrities never came” (301). Ananda’s carving combines the modernist technology to “homogenize the stone, blend the face into a unit” (302) and an appreciation for the postmodern which makes him “leave it as it was” (302), focusing instead “on the composure and the qualities of the face” (302). This is a pivotal element of the text’s representation of the modern-postmodern tension: although Anil identifies the victim as “something not prehistoric” (50) by documenting how his “bones were still held together by

dried ligaments” (50), it is the villagers’ ability to identify Ruwan Kumara as *a living person* which completes Anil’s evidence. Thus, the modernist truth of a forensically examined body also requires the postmodern human recognition to grant the victim a whole identity just as a religious statue needs traditionally painted eyes, as “without the eyes there is not just blindness, there is nothing” (99).

The representation of the modern-postmodern tension in this novel takes a comparatively direct and concise form, posing the West in contrast to the East, and expressing the concept of truth as a modernist luxury which ceases to hold power in the postmodernist milieu of post-civil war Sri Lanka. Anil’s return forms an integral element of the novel, with her ‘foreign expert’ status effectively undermining her contribution in domestic eyes and detaching her from those Sri Lankans who remained to witness years of brutality. Sarath’s early conditional response to the validity of Anil’s viewpoint – “I’d believe your arguments more if you lived here” (44) – ultimately expose the difficulty of combining these two strands of ideology in any harmonious manner. Anil does adopt a degree of the Sri Lankan struggle into her identity by combining her sense of modernist justice with the postmodernist in the Armoury Auditorium, suddenly “no longer just a foreign authority” (272) as she accuses the government of murdering “hundreds of us” (272). Yet, the modernist-postmodernist tensions nonetheless continue to force a strict ideological separation, as Anil ultimately still flies back to the West to ensure their evidence reaches the empowered eyes of Geneva. The novel’s depiction of the Western-Eastern divide – and the implications of Anil’s departure

– thus mellows slightly in the final notes of the book to soften the edges of the divide, but does not allow the degree of mingled hybridization evident in *The English Patient*.

The mitigation of the novel's Western Eastern stand-off emerges via a two-part story, the former of which concerns the description of Dr. Linus Corea and the latter, Gamini. A Sri Lankan neurosurgeon in the private sector in “his late forties when the war broke out” (120), Dr. Linus Corea is instantly associated with the privileged detachment of the West, despite his having descended from three generations of Colombo doctors. Dr. Corea’s wealth allows him to distance himself from the fighting which, “like most doctors he thought was...madness” (120), a privileged existence that “created a bubble he rode within” (120). From the moment he is kidnapped by insurgents for his medical skills, Dr. Linus Corea is referred to as simply Linus Corea, immersed in the reality of conducting emergency operations by the light of a “lantern...hung...on a hook above a half-dead body” (122), having found there was no longer any “energy in him to be angry or insulted” (123). Never returning to Colombo, Linus Corea means little to Gamini, who recalls him as merely a missing stranger who “had been kidnapped a few years earlier” (127). However, Gamini’s experience later completes the elliptical nature of this parable of warfare when he drunkenly steps onto the beach from the cosseted safety of “the Nilaveli Beach Hotel compound” (218) and wakes to find himself in “a hut of wounded boys” (218). Remembering the story of Linus Corea, Gamini initially questions “whether he himself would ever return to Colombo” (220), yet he clinically assesses the validity of staying to treat the

wounded, doubting the morality of a group who “sent a thirteen-year-old to fight...for what furious cause?” (220). Repeating the modernist spirit of Western political decisions which keeps doctors aloof from the wounded, Gamini’s detached judgment thus moderates the divergence of the international divide by suggesting such pragmatic decisions are made by Sri Lankans also. While weighing up the fate of the thousands who “couldn’t walk or use their bowels anymore” (220), a modernist clarity seizes Gamini and draws him back from the frontlines; “Still. He was a doctor. In a week he would be back working in Colombo” (220).

These intercessions are minor in contrast to the novel’s predominantly binary representation of the modern-postmodern tension, through its depiction of the Western-Eastern ideological divide. However, these assuagements are critical, as they allow the text a definitive conclusion without conveying the struggle in over-simplistic terms. This isolated approach resonates in the segment entitled ‘The Life Wheel’, in which the novel progresses with a sense of modernist clarity that seemingly harbours neither resentment nor a desire to affix blame, while maintaining the undiluted, separated vision of the complicated and lethal postmodern consequences. Having deliberately crossed the “moats of privacy he had established around himself” (278), Sarath forfeits his life with little fanfare, in the name of “the intricacies of the public world, with its various forms of truth” (279), and places his faith in the authority modernist evidence engenders in the Western world. By comparison, Anil dissolves her belief in the omnipotent nature of the truth and accepts that “she wouldn’t be staying there much longer” (283)

after acknowledging that “there was no wish in her to be here anymore” (283), suggesting she now sees the futility of Western evidence against the government of a country in which there was “blood everywhere”, “a casual sense of massacre” (283). Thus, the novel offers a glimpse of a cross-influential acceptance of the limitations inherent in each of their stances. However, in possession of a rapidly re-created report to replace the confiscated version, Anil still ultimately leaves Sri Lanka on an early morning flight back to the West, thus re-separating the two realms of her identity into distinct zones. With respect to the novel’s representation of modern versus postmodern concepts of truth, this conclusion offers only a very slight concession to an interlocking perspective: although Anil leaves, it is only by doing so that she can grant Western validation to the information for which Sarath sacrificed his life, and, tellingly, the narrative autonomy does not depart along with her. This approach affords a sense of resolution to the novel’s conclusion by balancing Anil’s departure with a narrative perspective that excludes her once she leaves Sri Lankan soil. Anil re-immerses herself in the modernist world but the novel does not bestow upon her the connotations of superiority typically reserved for the Western perspective. The modern and the postmodern, the Western and the Eastern, are re-divided, but *Anil’s Ghost* does not allow the narrative to automatically retreat to a Western view of Sri Lanka as interchangeable with “Mombassa or Vietnam or Jakarta” (286). Anil does emulate the detachment of previous Western visitors reflected in books and films, echoing “the American or Englishman” who “gets on a plane and leaves” (285), but, significantly, she leaves the power of narrative perspective

behind her when she does so. The “camera” which “leaves with him” (285) does not leave with her, and thus unlike the Western image of a “tired hero...going home”, the novel’s concluding focus remains upon Sri Lanka to ensure that Anil’s flight does not mean “the war, to all purposes, is over” (286).

## **Chapter Five**

### **Conclusions**

The contrasting representation of the modern-postmodern tension in *Anil's Ghost* and *The English Patient* lends both novels an air of temporal immersion, allowing each to be read as a product of its respective time setting as much as of its characters. Considering the disparate settings of 1945 Italy and 2000 Sri Lanka alongside each other grants significant insight into the novels' differing approach to the tension between modern and postmodern ideas of identity, nationality and truth, with this divergence an expression of how the surrounding social mood feeds and propels the characters' motivations. This juxtaposition is reflected in each novel's closing narrative structure, with *The English Patient* concluding on an utterly ambiguous yet hopeful tone that resonates with the transitional atmosphere of the time, while the more defined approach of *Anil's Ghost* allows the novel to express the continued division of Western and Eastern ideals.

Although by training its closing focus upon Ananda, *Anil's Ghost* does suggest the Eastern discourse may not always remain oppressed, the lens still views Sri Lanka at the expense of excluding Anil, thus the distinct detachment of the 2000 global divide remains.

In a 2000 interview with Dave Weich<sup>63</sup>, Michael Ondaatje commented on the segregated feeling of *Anil's Ghost*, noting how the novel takes a differing approach to his more poetical, "enigmatic and aphoristic" other works, instead

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<sup>63</sup> Weich, Dave. 'Michael Ondaatje's Cubist Civil War', <http://www.powells.com/authors/ondaatje.html>. Pp 1-4.

creating a text which Ondaatje describes as “much more detailed and tactile, of the present as opposed to the past, forensic in that sense” (1). Although the clinical feel of *Anil’s Ghost* remains a clear contrast to the more archaeological, subjective tone of his poetry collection<sup>64</sup>, the novel does offer a slightly moderated conclusion which Ondaatje notes reflects the “balancing act” of writing, a combination of the need to maintain the integrity of the overall themes of the novel and the writer’s responsibility “to get the reader out of the story somehow” (2). This sentiment is evident in the mellowed closing tone of *Anil’s Ghost*, as, at this late stage, the text allows a slight relaxation of the ideological boundaries that are otherwise strictly defined throughout. This temperance is expressed in the novel’s choice of concluding narrative focus, which, by remaining in Sri Lanka after Anil’s departure, emphasises the Western-Eastern themes of the novel without making this dichotomy too simplified, a point noted by Ondaatje, who comments that as a writer, “you don’t want to make it too neat or too smug” (2). The sense of an open possibility for progression and opportunity resonates to a much greater degree in the conclusion of *The English Patient*, which seemingly allows Kirpal to exist in a new, autonomous manner outside of what Ondaatje describes as “the nationalistic passions of war” (3). The divergence of these concluding tones epitomizes the variation between each novel’s representations of the modern-postmodern tension, with *Anil’s Ghost* continuing to express how the extreme juxtaposition of modernism and postmodernism

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<sup>64</sup> In this interview, Ondaatje compares the clinical, forensic tone of *Anil’s Ghost* to the more archaeological feel of his book of poems, entitled *Handwriting*. Ondaatje notes the contrast of the ancient archaeology of *Handwriting* and contemporary forensics of *Anil’s Ghost*, seemingly juxtaposing the ambiguous feel of poetry against the defined sense of modernist science in *Anil’s Ghost*.

forbids a middle ground, and creates what Ondaatje calls “Anil’s alienation”, since she “doesn’t belong in Sri Lanka....She has no bearings. Even her name is not her own” (3). Offering a small mingling of the West and East at the text’s end therefore creates the ‘out’ to which Ondaatje previously refers, rather than changing the novel’s overall sentiment. The Sri Lankan narrative focus, therefore, emphasises the pieced, split-screen aspect of *Anil’s Ghost* by showing the modern and postmodern perspectives as an arrangement of intersecting viewpoints rather than a quilted amalgamation, with the Western and Eastern experiences runs parallel so that, Ondaatje notes, “you’re getting everyone’s point of view at the same time, which...is the perfect state for a novel: a cubist state, the cubist novel”<sup>65</sup>. Where *Anil’s Ghost* depicts a multi-faceted cubist conclusion, by comparison, *The English Patient* presents an impressionist-style ending, with characters so freely continuing to influence and experience each other that Ondaatje felt the novel needed to conclude with a fitting note of mingled ambiguity, through “someone dropping a fork in Canada and someone catching a fork in India”<sup>66</sup>.

The comparative representation of the modern-postmodern tension in *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost* forms an interesting juxtaposition with respect to the degree of ideological resolution in each, and the wider implications of these contrasting depictions. The former offers few definitive answers regarding the competing ideals of modernism and postmodernism, instead presenting a mere

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Michael Ondaatje’s Cubist Civil War’, <http://www.powells.com/authors/ondaatje.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Ondaatje Interview with <http://www.salon.com/nov96/ondaatje961118.html>  
Interviewed November 1996.

quasi-conclusion which allows Almásy and Kirpal to remain ideological hybrids.

By comparison, *Anil's Ghost* maintains a greater degree of separation between the modern and postmodern throughout the novel, allowing only a slight collusion between the ideals before a re-segregation. Thus, the semblance of unification between the two stances, which emerges towards the end of the novel, ultimately disappears, creating a conclusion that relegates each back into detached spheres. The different approach employed by each novel sees the characters of the former remain inherently blended identities, with Kirpal and Almásy geographically separate yet still fundamentally ideologically altered by their interactions at the Villa. Kirpal's return to India signifies that he is no longer enthralled by the empowered gaze of Western societies that privilege "the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever" (151), yet he does retain a sense of this modernism within him. Seemingly bridging "the turbulent river of space" (320) between the worlds, Kirpal sits at a table where "all of their hands are brown" (320) yet still traverses easily the distance between the exhausting "sun of India" (318) and the West. This ability to effortlessly shift focus "back within the air towards the hill town in Italy" (318-319) suggests he holds the freedom to elect his own hybridised identity: although he has now become the doctor his modernist family initially wished, it is according to his own terms and he possesses the autonomy to adopt and discard elements of modernity and postmodernity as he desires.

This dual perspective, which allows Kirpal to contentedly retain elements of both a modernist and postmodernist outlook, by contrast, seemingly offers only

immobilizing emotional entrapment to Almásy. The morphine coursing through Almásy's shell-like burnt body leaves him vacillating between his present-tense life and memories, experiencing simultaneous regret and gratitude for the events of his life that have propelled him back and forth between ideological beliefs. The combination of great love and numbing loss that offered Almásy the glimpses that drew him towards the safe tranquility of modernity, have also later left him feeling abandoned in the disillusionment of postmodernity. Therefore, the sanctity of the memories that granted Almásy a sense of modernist security are interspersed with an all-encompassing grief, the mourning of 'modernism lost' which forged his deep denial of all definitions and rebounded him into a postmodern despair. Such lamenting introversion reflects his dual desire for possession and utter freedom, creating a bitter fusion of craving and loathing for the modern and postmodern elements of his memories. Such alloyed reminiscence sees Almásy acknowledge that although "every person and place was a gift" (273), the unsecured, postmodernist regions of his life also means "everything [he has] loved or valued has been taken away" (273). Thus, the tumultuous urges which drove Almásy to defy the glorified demarcations of modernism in favour of the beauty of "a naked map where nothing is depicted" (277) remain intertwined with a tortured determination to recall modernist details. Unable to entirely envelop himself in the haze, this blended existence renders Almásy a haunted hybrid, desiring to "walk upon such an earth that had no maps" while summoning the exact location of the Cave of Swimmers', "latitude 23° 30' on the map, longitude 25° 12'" (273).

Written in 2000, *Anil's Ghost* presents a comparatively resolved conclusion in comparison to that of *The English Patient*, with Anil returning “to the adopted country of her choice” (285), and Sarath’s death confirmed via Gamini’s recognition of his “wounds, the innocent ones” (287). Although altered by her experience, Anil remains fundamentally committed to the West and thus leaves Sri Lanka in the same abrupt manner in which she left her married love, who “had already pawned his heart” (264). Anil’s desire to understand and aid Sri Lanka is, seemingly, overruled by what she perceives as the futility of progression within such a postmodernist haze: just as “no Westerner could ever understand the love they had for the place” (285), Anil exits the book as predominantly a Western eavesdropper on “*their* conversation about the war in their country” (285).

The analysis of the modern and postmodern tension in Ondaatje’s literature is inherently problematic, since any perspective is naturally a coloured, reflexive product of the time in which it is based. The transitional nature of stylistic eras means the postmodern draws heavily from the modern, creating a tidal surge which draws the characters of *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* between the polar edges of this ideological spectrum. This subjectivity makes for complex criticism, yet as Walter Perera notes, also allows many diverse approaches to the material, as although “the terms are manifold, complex, contradictory, and problematic; nevertheless, this opacity does have advantages. It allows critics to explore there literatures in several ways”<sup>67</sup>. Placing both

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<sup>67</sup> Perera, Walter. ‘The Phases and Guises of the Twentieth-Century Sri Lankan Expatriate Novel’. *Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English*, 2000. Pp. 52-60.

contrasting and alternating emphasis upon the modernist and postmodernist perspective, *Anil's Ghost* seemingly seeks to represent a balanced, mutually influential portrayal of how each element affects the other, through a deliberate segregation of the modern-postmodern along the Western-Eastern seam. The novel, therefore, conveys images of Western dominance alongside what Brenda Glover describes as a “construction of history and identity through language, and the place of memory in the location of a sense of self for people who are marginalized, disconnected or displaced” (76). This sentiment emerges in the conclusion of *Anil's Ghost*, as although the text largely continues with a dichotomous representation of the modern-postmodern tension, in this segment it makes a gesture – if still slight – towards the complexity, or possible hybridity, of a modern and postmodern outlook. The novel expresses this moderate mellowing through its concluding narrative focus, which remains rooted in a Sri Lankan perspective rather than departing along with Anil. The closing perspective remains focused upon a Sri Lankan viewpoint, with a description of Ananda which seemingly emphasises how his decisions shape the future while maintaining a respect for the complicated past. By carefully concentrating the conclusion upon Ananda’s fused artistic perspective, the novel implies that the recovery of this nation lies in remembering its history while also facing the future, as expressed in Ananda’s redemptive path back to the living via the past as he prepares to “perform the eye ceremony on the new statue” (305). With Anil’s departure effectively removing her from the novel, the narrative then completely privileges the Sri Lankan discourse through its description of Ananda, who strives

to present the Buddha's face from a postmodernist viewpoint yet with a sense of authenticity, as he does "not create or invent faces anymore" (303). Discarding his previous Western-influenced, one-dimensional approach, Ananda instead allows the complexity of Sri Lankan history to emerge through the Buddha's face undiluted and unapologetically, observing how "its one hundred chips and splinters of stone" (303) show clearly as "sunlight hits the seams of its face" (304), while simultaneously acknowledging that although the past is "sewn roughly together" (304), "he wouldn't hide that" (304). The novel's binary and segregated representation of the modern-postmodern tension is still evident in the dichotomous description of Ananda's salvaged mind – reflected in this segment as the clear choice between the modernist artifice of holy statues and the more intangible, postmodernist faith in religion that they represent – yet this divide still offers a potential mid-point; Ananda knows that although "as an artificer he did not celebrate the greatness of a faith" (304), he also realises that if he does not cling to his skill he will become once again enveloped in despair, as "he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons" (304). Thus, in remaining with the Sri Lankan discourse, the novel's narrative very hesitantly suggests not only the potential for salvation through ideological hybridity, but also how the inherently blended outlook of Sri Lanka is critical to mental and physical survival in the extremely postmodernist surrounds of civil conflict.

The slight ideological softening that emerges at the conclusion of *Anil's Ghost* slightly counters the bleak abandonment with which Anil departs, granting

the novel a minor sense of optimism and empowerment in spite of the apparent re-segregation of the Western and Eastern spheres. This moderation is, however, inherently fleeting like all moments of global empowerment in Sri Lanka, as although he ephemerally feels “this sweet touch from the world” (307), the statue he paints is only partially recoverable and “no longer a god” (307) possessing not “its graceful line but only the pure sad glance Ananda had found” (307). Thus, the novel still emphasises that the moment of unification in which he simultaneously feels “the smallest approach of a bird...each current of wind, every lattice-like green shadow” (207) disappears so quickly, that Ananda only “briefly saw this angle of the world” (307).

This element of fusion and re-separation resonates with Kirpal’s final scene in *The English Patient*, offering an interesting parallel and juxtaposition between the two novels concluding perspectives. While *Anil’s Ghost* ultimately remains true to its divided sentiment by conveying a return to separate realms after Ananda’s short-lived optimistic view, *The English Patient* suggests a more optimistic freedom lies in Kirpal’s ambiguous dual perspective, expressing this as an ability to cross the divide at any point through his memories. Undermining this element of *The English Patient* is, however, the immobilization this engenders in Almásy, implying the novel’s message is simply to gain autonomy and reach peace with a decision, rather than become obsessed by the competing elements of each choice. There is, the novel implies, no definitive ‘best’ choice and no clear note of approval regarding whether Kirpal should have stayed in England or not. The transitional period in which *The English Patient* is set, therefore, seemingly

grants the novel a greater degree of optimism than *Anil's Ghost*, leaving possibilities – for the brave – open through an ambiguous conclusion, while making Almásy an alternate symbol of the stagnating effects of fear. By comparison, *Anil's Ghost* does not propose such sanguine potential; the small ideological overlap dissipates as quickly as it appears, emphasising how the suggested opportunities of *The English Patient* have failed to materialize in the highly globalised yet disparate Western-Eastern world of *Anil's Ghost*.

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