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**MICHAEL ONDAATJE’NİN *THE ENGLISH PATIENT* ADLI
ESERİNDE SAVAŞ VE KİMLİK**

***WAR AND IDENTITY IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S
THE ENGLISH PATIENT***

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Öz

20. yüzyıl, post-kolonyal teori olarak adlandırılan yeni bir edebi teori ortaya çıkışına tanık olur. Bu edebi eleştiri, sömürgeleştirilmiş ülkelerin tarihini açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Sömürgeleştirilmiş ülkelerin edebiyatını okumak suretiyle sömürge sonrası yazarlar ve eleştirmenler, sömürgeleştirilmiş ulusların mirası ve kültürü üzerindeki olumsuz etkilerini ortaya koymuşlardır. Postkolonyal teori, sömürgeciliğin sömürülen ülkeyi ekonomi, siyaset, kültür ve benzeri konularda da nasıl etkilediğini aydınlatmaktadır. Michael Ondaatje *İngiliz Hasta* romanıyla ana karakterleri üzerinde sömürgeciliğin korkunç sonuçlarını sahneler. Postkolonyal yazar olarak Ondaatje, sömürgeciliğin, emperyalizmin ve savaşın yıkıcı etkilerinin farkındadır. Bu yüzden savaşçı karakterlerinin yaşamına iner ve onların nasıl etkilendiğini inceler. Yazar, temel olarak, II. Dünya Savaşı'nın son aşamasında birbirleriyle çakışan dört yaralı insanın hayatını özetler. Savaşın olumsuz sonuçlarından dolayı, karakterler yerinden yurdundan olma, kimlik kaybı ve kültürel sorunlar gibi farklı sorunlarla karşı karşıyadır. Bu karakterler kendilerini İtalya'da yalıtılmış bir villada bulurlar. İngiliz Hasta İkinci Dünya Savaşı nedeniyle karakterlerin travmalarını ve yeni bir kimlik oluşturma

mücadelelerini açıklamaya çalışır. Bu yazıda, İngiliz Hasta'da kimlik, yerinden edilme ve savaş konularını postkolonyal teorinin kritik lensleri aracılığıyla incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Savaş, Kimlik kaybı, Sömürgecilik, Postkolonyalizm, The English Patient, Michael Ondaatje.

Abstract

The 20th century saw the advent of a new literary theory called post-colonial theory. This literary criticism aims to unearth the history of colonized countries. Through reading the literature of colonized countries, post-colonial writers and critics lay bare the negative impacts of colonialism on the heritage, culture and legacy of the colonized nations. Post-colonial theory also illuminates how colonialism affects the colonized country in terms of economy, politics, culture and so forth. Michael Ondaatje in his famous novel *The English Patient* portrays the horrific consequences of colonialism on his main characters. Ondaatje as a postcolonial writer is acutely aware of the devastating impacts of colonialism, imperialism and war. Therefore, he goes deep into the life of his war-weary characters and scrutinizes how they are affected by colonialism. Basically, the author epitomizes the life of four damaged people who are tangled together at the last stage of World War II. Due to the negative consequences of war, the characters face different problems such as dislocation, loss of identity and cultural problems. Eventually, the characters find themselves in an isolated Villa in Italy. So, *The English Patient* endeavors to unveil the traumas of the characters due to the Second World War and their struggle to construct a new identity. This paper aims to examine the issues of identity, displacement and war in *The English Patient* through the critical lenses of post-colonial theory.

Keywords: War, Loss of Identity, Colonialism, Post-colonialism, The English Patient, Michael Ondaatje.

Introduction

Through the ages, literature has witnessed numerous literary theories. Each theory uses different characteristics and techniques to interpret and understand works of literature. Basically, most of the theories are used to give a broader understanding of literary works. Among these theories is the post-colonial theory which deals with the literature of colonized countries. In other words, by reading the literature of colonized countries from a post-colonial perspective; readers can notice and understand the effects of colonialism on colonized nations. Firstly, colonialism, as defined in *Oxford English of Politics*, is “The policy and practice of a strong power extending its control territorially over a weaker nation or people” (Stevenson). So, colonialism involves using power to occupy another country which is less powerful and this policy leaves several negativities on the colonized nations. Obviously, until the end of World War II,

Colonialism was like a phenomenon where European countries invaded many eastern countries. This invasion did not only include the occupation of land but also of language, culture and other different aspects of life. Therefore, it is the aim of post-colonial theory to securitize the literature of the colonized nations and reveal the impacts of colonialism on them. As the term denotes, post-colonialism refers to a time period “After-colonialism or after-independence” (Bill Ashcroft 12). Some of the colonized countries got their independence after colonialized and some other have not yet got independence. All in all, even nowadays, the impacts of colonialism can still be observed in the colonized nations.

One of the influential proponents of the post-colonial theory is Edward W. Said. Other theorists who have contributed to the rise of postcolonial theory include Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha. Said’s famous book, *Orientalism*, is regarded as the cornerstone of post-colonial theory as Pal Ahluwalia puts it “Orientalism inaugurated the field of postcolonial theory” (Politics and Post-Colonial Theory: African Inflections 2). Said defines Orientalism as “A Western style for domination, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Orientalism 11).

Post-colonial theory is somehow ambiguous to define, but as the term denotes; it is an era after the colonial period. In *Introduction to Post-colonial Theory*, Childs and Williams define post-colonialism as “The completion of one period of history and the emergence of another” (Peter Childs 1). However, nowadays, the term of post colonialism or post-colonial is used more broadly, as it can refer to different aspects of life such as nationality ethnicity, culture and identity. So, post-colonial critics and writers aim to examine the social, cultural, and political effects of colonization on the colonized nations. Because during the mid of twentieth century, World Power countries such as Russia, America and particularly England colonized the majority of the world as Gale claims “More than a quarter of all territory were on the surface of the earth; one in four people was a subject of Queen Victoria” (A Study Guide for "Postcolonialism" 3).

Overall, colonization produced several problems for the colonized people. So post-colonial literature brings to light all the problems of colonization. War, violence, cultural hybridity are central to post-colonial theory. So, the writers and critics of this school of literary criticism try to unearth the story of oppressed people, nations and marginalized voices who were affected by colonization. To do so, the writers make use of the notion of history so as to narrate the stories

of colonized nations and uncover the influence of colonialism on the different levels of their lives.

Michael Ondaatje

The English Patient is one of the famous works of Michael Ondaatje. Ondaatje is a Canadian theorist, writer, poet, novelist and critic. He was born in 1943, in Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is considered as one of best works of post-colonialism. In the novel, the author draws the readers' attention to the main themes post-colonial theory. Basically, Ondaatje pays a close attention to the themes of identity, culture and displacement which are the key concerns of post colonialism. *The English Patient* could be regarded as a mirror of Ondaatje's personal life as he experienced most these issues like identity problem, displacement and cultural hybridity. Ondaatje was raised in multicultural societies and has lived in different places. In 1952 he left Sri Lanka and moved to England. And in 1962, he moved to Canada and settled there, where he obtained his Master of Arts Degree. Ondaatje career has seen numerous achievements as he has awards such as Prix Medicis, Giller Prize, Epstein Award, and the Presidents Medal of the University of Ontario. (Gale)

The English Patient

The English Patient was published in 1992 and won the Booker Prize for Fiction and the Governor General's Award. *The English Patient* was set in Italy, at the end of the World War II. Basically, the novel tells the story of four characters who are tangled together in an Italian villa named Villa San Girolamo. The main characters have gone through tough moments due to the aftermath of war. They have been mentally, physically and psychologically affected by the trenches of warfare. They are displaced and become refugees in the Italian Villa.

The characters are from different nationalities; Hana; a young Canadian nurse who treats people who are affected by the war, Kip; an Indian, who serves in the British Army as a bomb diffuser, David Caravaggio; a friend of Hana's father who served as a spy during the war, and the English patient whose identity remains mysterious. (Gale 3) As it is stated, the characters are from different countries and have different cultures and religions. In addition to this, they have served during the war and are displaced due to the war. As the novel is set in an Italian villa and none of the characters are from Italy; therefore, this is a clear indication of displacement which is an important theme of post-colonial theory. In other words, the characters have fled their homeland and sought refuge in the abandoned Villa in Italy. Another

clear-cut theme that Ondaatje portrays in the novel is the identity issue. Ondaatje through one of the main characters; the English 'patient' informs the readers of the identity crisis as his identity remains unknown until the very end of the novel. Not only the English 'patient' has the problem of identity but all the main characters. *The English Patient* goes deep into the lives of these four damaged characters, in order to demonstrate the catastrophe of war and the influences of colonialism on them.

Displacement and Identity in *The English Patient*

One of the key themes in post-colonial literature is the notion of displacement. The post-colonial theory attempts to investigate the effects of colonial power on the colonized nations. War as the central theme of the post-colonial criticism brings many destructions including displacement. In other words, war is the cause of all the miseries. So, displacement is an obvious result of war and as the term denotes, it is the act of forcing a group of people to leave their homeland and place. Therefore, the people who leave their place face many problems as the result of war. Displacement is not a new phenomenon; it has a quite long history as wars have been part of the history of human beings. So with the start of each war thousands of people get displaced and this displacement causes several other crises.

Ondaatje in *The English Patient* clearly explores the notion of displacement on his main characters. In the course of the novel, the author informs the readers that all the main characters are exiles; they are far away from their home. They reside in an isolated Italian Villa named San Girolamo. All the characters are war-weary; they have fled their homeland and sought refuge in the Italian Villa. Ondaatje opens the first chapter of the novel with a section entitled "The Villa" to inform the readers of the displacement problem. So, displacement as one of the magnitude results of the war causes several other problems; therefore, Ondaatje starts the novel by introducing the readers to the Villa where the characters reside because all of the characters are displaced "the Villa San Girolamo, previously a nunnery, whose castlelike battlements had made it the last stronghold of the German army [...] Parts of the top storey of the villa crumbled under explosions" (*The English Patient* 12). Ondaatje introduces the readers to a ruined villa in Italy. The villa is crushed and crumbled, yet the characters come together to live there.

Ondaatje depicts that some of the characters prefer to live in the abandoned Villa than living under the colonial power. A firm evidence would be "She herself preferred to be nomadic in the house

with her pallet or hammock, sleeping sometimes in the English patient's room" (The English Patient 14). In this quote, Ondaatje portrays that one of the main characters; Hana chooses to be nomadic. She prefers to live in a ruined Villa far away from her homeland. So this is a clear critique of the author against imperialism and colonialism. He portrays the horrific consequences of colonialism on individuals. Since *the English Patient* is set at the end of the Second World War, so the above quotations is a clear criticism of the author against war and violence.

Hana is not the only displaced character but all the other characters are displaced, as John Bolland claims "The inhabitants of the Villa are all displaced individuals" (Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient: A Reader's Guide* 35). So from this quote, it becomes clear that Hana is not alone in the Villa; she is tangled with the other three characters. Eventually, the Villa becomes a safe haven for them and through it; they protect themselves from the trenches of warfare. They all are the victims of war. Ondaatje's demonstration of the notion of displacement could mirror his personal life. As it has been mentioned earlier, Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka but during his childhood, he immigrated to England and then to Canada. So displacement could be considered as one of the problems that he faced in his real life. In *The English Patient*, the Villa San Girolamo is of so much importance. Firstly, the author notifies the readers about one of the horrific consequences of war and colonialism which is displacement. Then, He elucidates how displacement leads to another challenging issue which is the problem of identity. And the cause of all of these problems is war. So war is the cause of all misery; it causes displacement and identity issue.

Another seminal theme in the novel is the identity problem of the characters. Post-colonial literature pays a close attention to the problem of identity. Therefore, Michael Ondaatje as a post-colonial writer depicts identity issue as a key theme in his work. In *The English Patient*, displacement and identity are common themes and are interrelated. As it is known, identity is a social construct which is defined by the connection between self and other. As Stuart Hall notes "Identities are always relational, and incomplete, in process" (*Questions of Cultural Identity: SAGE Publications* 89). So, in *The English Patient*, the characters have left their homeland and live in an isolated villa in Italy. In other words, they are alienated from their homeland. So, it is an indication that they all have the problem of identity. A clear evidence could be "But I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. By the time war arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to

anyone, to any nation” (The English Patient 139). This reference highlights the importance of belonging. The characters feel that they do not belong to anywhere because they are away from their homeland. Therefore, the impact of this alienation from homeland constitutes the challenging issue of identity. In the above quote, Ondaatje brings to light the controversial issues of identity, belonging, war and nationalism. These issues are the concern of post-colonialism. Michael Ondaatje as a post-colonial writer disparages the colonial countries as they have put everything at stake. They have ruined the life of colonized people in every aspect. Because colonialism is not just the occupation of land and property. It is the occupation of national and individual identity, too. The effects of colonialism are not momentary; they stay for a quite long period as Frantz Fanon observes:

Colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. (The Post-colonial Studies Reader 126)

Generally, this reference brings to light the devastating consequences of colonialism. The problems of colonialism cannot be measured. Colonialism is like a poison; it goes deep inside the mind and thought of colonized people and constantly hurts them; it is like an indelible scar. Therefore, the aim of post-colonial theory is to unearth all these problems. Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* constantly reminds the readers about the devastating impacts of colonialism, imperialism war, tyranny and violence. The characters are isolated from their homeland and live in an isolated villa in Italy. Therefore, on one hand, this is an archetype of telling the readers that the characters have lost their real identity. On the other hand, having resided in a different place (San Girolamo) is the epitome of resurrecting their real identity. In Ondaatje’s novel, the characters are from different countries; Canada, India, England and one character (English patient) remains mysterious until the very end, So this is another epitome of the problem of identity:

A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire. Parts of his burned body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid, that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin. The area around his eyes was coated with a thick layer of gentian violet.

There was nothing to recognize in him. (The English Patient 48)

This quote reveals that the English patient is a man with an unknown identity. He is physically burned. He is burned to an extent that cannot be recognized. So, the author informs the readers of the loss of identity of one of the main characters in the novel. It is owing to war and violence that his identity is erased. In the above quote, Ondaatje depicts the effects of colonization which has endangered the identity of the characters, in particular of the English patient as John Bolland claims “The central image of the English Patient is a figure whose identity is physically erased” (Bolland 37). As the story progresses, Ondaatje unearths the identity of the English patient. Due to war, he is burned and he cannot be recognized or identified. As he speaks English, he is considered to be an English man. But, in fact, he is not an English man “English patient is not English” (Ondaatje 163). As a matter of fact, he is a Hungarian desert explorer called Laslo Almasz.

The problem of identity is also depicted in the character of Kip (Kirpal Singh). Kip is an Indian man. Just like other characters, he is displaced. With the other three characters, he resides in San Girolamo Villa, in Italy. Kip worked as a bomb diffuser (sapper) in the British Army during the Second World War, yet he faces the identity problem. His real name is Kirpal Singh but after the war, he is often called Kip:

The sapper’s nickname is Kip. ‘Get Kip’. ‘Here comes Kip’. The name had attached itself to him curiously. In his first bomb disposal report in England some butter had marked his paper, the officer had exclaimed, ‘What’s this? Kipper grease?’ and laughter surrounded him. He had no idea what a Kipper was, but the young Sikh had been thereby translated into a salty English fish. Within a week his real name, Kirpal Snigh, had been forgotten. (The English Patient 87)

In this quotes, the author presents the identity problem of another main character. Kirpal Snigh is nicknamed as Kip or sapper of Sikh, by the English people. Since he serves in the British Army, the English men attempt to alter his name to Kip. So, it is a sort of colonizing his identity as the English men want him to be more English than his original; an Indian. Due to the dominant culture of the English, Kirpal had to accept his nickname and within a couple of weeks, his real name was forgotten. In addition to this, Kip experiences hybridity, as a result of being assimilated into another culture; from Indian culture to British culture. Bolland argues that Kip “Represents the in-between identity of the migrant” (Bolland 33). Kip loses his real identity and he

struggles to form a new identity. Even though Kip worked with colonial British Army but he is still declined to be recognized as a British. Kip openly expresses his anger and states “I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from your country. Your fragile white island that with costumes and manners and books and perfects and reasons somehow converted the rest of the world” (The English Patient 301). In this quote, Kip expresses his anger toward the British colony. Even though he has served in the British Army but he is not still accepted as ‘One’ of them but as ‘Other’. This argument brings about Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism*. In which he describes ‘Otherness’ and ‘Oneness’. In the case of Kip, he is regarded as ‘Other’, because he is not accepted as one of them, he even might be rejected not only by the British but by Indians as well. Eventually, Kip’s identity is distorted and crumbled.

Hana and David Caravaggio are other two characters in the novel who have experienced the traumas of war and faced identity problem. Hana is a Canadian nurse which cares for the patients of the war in the Villa San Griolamo. Caravaggio is the friend of Hana’s father. Like other characters, both are exiled and dislocated from their homeland. Hana has lost his father, her husband and her unborn baby due to the trenches of war. On the other hand, David Caravaggio is also a victim of war as he has lost his thumbs due to the war. In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje epitomizes two different characters yet they are both the victims of war and colonization. Hana as a nurse and Caravaggio as a spy and thief. Hana has lost his loved ones in the war. And Caravaggio has lost his thumbs and nerves due to the war “Caravaggio would never be able to use his hands as efficiently as before, a scar which will remain forever” (Negi 121).

Hana also faces the problem of identity. Like other characters, she is an escaper of war. She has left her homeland and treats the war patients in the Villa San Girolamo. Hana has lost her loved ones during the war and she expresses her boredom “I wanted to go home and there was no one at home. And I was sick of Europe. Sick of being treated like gold because I was female” (Ondaatje 85). In this reference, Hana expresses her anger toward the Europe. She has lost her loved ones during the war. She reveals how she was exploited by the Western Colonizers. With the other three characters, she resides in the Villa. After all, San Girolamo becomes a safe haven for her and becomes her second home. Therefore, Hana gets a polytrophic identity like Almay, Kip and Caravaggio. In addition to this, Hana is psychologically and mentally affected by the war on account of losing her loved ones. Caravaggio’s story is not different from the other three characters. He

was a thief and spy during war. He was also another victim of the war as he was handicapped due to the war. Throughout the novel, as like other characters, he searches for his true identity.

All in All, *The English Patient* uncovers one of the central problems of post-colonialism which is the identity crisis. Ondaatje does not let his reader forget the devastating consequences of war and violence. He always reminds the readers about the horrific impacts of war. War as the main reason has led to the problems of displacement and identity issue. Besides depicting the influence of war on individual levels, Ondaatje also uncovers another bitter reality of the colonizers as he states “The retreating army often left pencil mines within musical instruments. Returning owners opened pianos and lost their hands. People would revive the swing on a grandfather clock, and a glass bomb would blow out have a wall and whoever was nearby” (*The English Patient* 75). The consequences of colonialism are so devastating that even after the withdrawal of the colonizer; the effects would still be there. Mining the land and the destruction of nature are also other side effects of war.

Eventually, as the story comes to an end, Ondaatje expresses his anger toward the colonial powers such as Britain, France and America. He portrays it through; Kip, as one of the most affected characters “[...] American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the Brown races of the world, you are an Englishman. You had king Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English” (*The English Patient* 286). This is Kip’s response to the English patient, as he learns that atomic bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. This marks a paradigm shift in Kip’s personal view towards the Western colonials. Because, previously Kip worked alongside the British Army to dismantle bombs, but as he hears the news, he comes to believe that he cannot ally the colonizer. According to Kip, bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki not only injured Japan and Asia but the entire world “If he closes his eyes he sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadow of humans suddenly in the air. This tremor of West wisdom” (*Ondaatje* 302). Bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not only affect Kip but all characters. In case of Kip, this news was more horrific because he was working with the colonizers to dismantle bombs.

Conclusion

To sum up, Michael Ondaatje as a post-colonial writer brings to light the key themes of post-colonialism. Basically, he explores the

theme of war as the main reason for all the miseries and hardships. The author is acutely aware of the horrific consequences of colonialism; therefore, he goes deep into the characters' lives and examines every aspect of their lives. All of his four characters are victims of war. *The English Patient* presents the readers with many controversial issues such as war, displacement and identity crisis due to World War II. The characters are badly affected by the war as they are physically, mentally and psychologically affected by it. Throughout the novel, the author unearths the influence of colonialism and imperialism on the main characters. Ondaatje sets *The English Patient* in Villa San Girolamo. So this unearths one of the main causes of colonization which is displacement or dislocation. The characters are displaced; therefore, they face several other problems. They are alienated, isolated and they feel that they belong to no place and nation. From the very beginning of the novel, Ondaatje questions the identity of the characters. As the identity of one of the main character remains unknown till the middle part of the book. Overall, Ondaatje explicitly epitomizes how the Western hegemony and colonialism have distorted the identity of the colonized people. Ondaatje's last chapter of the book; bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki, shows his condemnation of Western colonization. All in all, *The English Patient* is a clear critique of the author against the colonial powers who have put every valuable thing at stake. The novel is a portrait of marginalized voiced and oppressed people who were badly affected by colonialism. To my way of thinking, the novel is a great attempt to unearth the misery of war-weary and colonized people. My family and I had experienced war, so I understand the magnitude effects of war. Finally, I can claim that War is like a poisonous substance; its effects remain in the mind and thought of war-weary people; it is an indelible scar.

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