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No Maps, Borders or Nations

Throughout history nations have joined, competed against and betrayed one another. As a result, most of the nations of the world have become increasingly more protective of their own country by putting up strong borders in order to protect and defend their nation’s culture and people. In Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, Ondaatje criticizes western culture’s interpretation of themselves and the rest of the world, and In doing so, expresses his vision of the world, its cultures and its peoples. In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje in visions a world without maps, borders, or nations; a place where there are no consequences for communicating with people from different cultures. Ondaatje feels that this ideal world can be found in deserts around the world. He feels that his vision is a representation of a desert because a desert is free of borders and limitations. The desert is a place where people from different cultures can share their lives with one another. There are no rules or customs restricting people from being with someone from another nation. Simply put, the desert is a place where one can free themselves from the nationalistic barriers they face in everyday life.

Like Ondaatje, the English patient expressed similar feelings about his vision of the world. In the novel, the English patient refers to Herodotus’ records of his travels and experiences. Herodotus, who was a Greek historian, would “travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it [was] the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage” (118). In doing so, Herodotus was able to share his experiences and findings with the world around him without passing any sort of judgment or prejudice. Like Herodotus, the English patient and Ondaatje feel that if the nations of the world were to view one another without a nationalistic outlook then the people making up those nations would be less restricted to who they could communicate with. The individuals that make up those nations would therefore be more accepting of unique people and cultures, thereby reducing the desire to go to war and the frequency of wars between nations. For example, The Cold War, following World War II, was filled with times of low and high tension between the Soviet Union, its satellite states and the powerful countries of the west, particularly the United States of America. The opposing sides had different ideas in regards to postwar resolutions. One of the major conflicts that occurred during The Cold War was The Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was fought by communist North Vietnam and the government of South Vietnam. Countries such as the United States and the Soviet Union joined the war to ensure that their governmental beliefs be expressed over the other in more nations around the world. The Cold War could have been prevented if the nations of the world were less motivated by power and more determined in bettering the quality of life of each individual in their nation. To clarify if the government and people of each nation were to accept one another, therefore remove all nations, all states and all borders then the nations of the world would not be as isolated from one another. As a result, those nations would be able to share and compromise with one another instead of argue and cheat. Altogether, if the world were to experience the same sort of interaction as the four characters at the Villa San Girolamo, in *The English Patient,* then there would be more acceptance and positive interaction between people around the world.

The four characters that lived at the Villa, Kirpal, Hana, Almasy and Carravagio, all came from different backgrounds. Despite their differences they were all able to come together and learn about one another during their stay. Kirpal Singh was an Indian Sapper working for the British Army, Hana was a Canadian nurse, the English patient, also known as Almasy, was a burn patient that was brought to the Villa and Carravagio was a Canadian spy and old friend of Hana’s father. All of the characters, especially Kirpal, were able to put aside national and cultural differences throughout the majority of the book and learn about one another in a non-prejudice way. The opportunity of coming in to close proximity with an absolute stranger and leaving the situation with a new appreciation for that individual is called propinquity. The four characters at the villa experienced propinquity, that is, they all had the opportunity to learn about each other’s experiences, family and culture. It was because of propinquity that the characters were able to forget about nations, borders and the things that divide them and concentrate on what was truly important, friendship. For example, Kirpal and Hana’s relationship in *The English Patient* was able to flourish because they were brought in to close proximity of one another where there was no opportunity to hide behind their nations borders. Propinquity allowed an unlikely relationship, between Kirpal and Hana, to grow into something that felt incredibly natural. Unfortunately, however, the opportunity that Kirpal and Hana had of coming together was very rare during that time. Ondaatje comments, “you find… cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history- how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love” (119). What Ondaatje is referring to is the end of relationships between people from different nations because their cultures prevent the forward movement of that relationship. Therefore, cul-de-sacs refer to the dead ends in history where there was no opportunity for growth in certain relationships because of how their nations felt about it. This is why it would be life altering for most individuals if nationalistic borders were set aside, because it would give the people around the world to opportunity to interact and learn about someone or something without someone judging or preventing them.

Without trying to be a pessimist, the world today is far behaving nation-less. If anything the world today is striving towards greater nationalism. The reality of the division of nations is represented towards the end of the novel when Kirpal hears about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After hearing the news Kirpal immediately lets out a scream filled with pain and horror and marches toward the Villa with rifle in hand. Pointing the rifle at the English Patient Kirpal says

My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them... What have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For this to happen? (284-285)

What Ondaatje is creating with this scene is the reality that the world is divided. Although his vision of the world is based on a desert-like place where there are no borders that divide power. The reality of the matter is that there are nations out there that have more power than others. When those powerful nations choose to destroy the other they ruin any opportunity for the people of those nations to come together. They take a war based on government power and turn it into a war of the people. Because most people take pride in where they come from when that home becomes attacked or destroyed the people from that area instantly grow negative feelings towards the people who attacked them, which occurred when Kirpal left the Villa. All feelings of war go straight to the personal level resulting in the people of one nation refusing to talk to, look at or associate themselves with any other nation. Therefore resulting in “the personal…forever at war with the public” (292).

Ondaatje’s ideal vision of the world is one with no maps, no borders and no nations. That is, a world where people can walk from one area to the next and feel accepted. Ondaatje’s vision is expressed through the English patient. The English patient wished that all cultural interactions could occur in a desert like place where there would be nothing ordinary or recognizable. When people are brought together in an atmosphere similar to the desert they are able to learn about one another without any barriers. As a result, these people benefit due to propinquity. They develop an acceptance for new cultures and beliefs. With that said, Ondaatje’s main goal was to express the benefits of being able to “walk upon such an earth that had no maps” (261). Therefore, to be able to walk upon such an earth where there are no roadblocks or cul-de-sacs preventing the further progression of an individual from expanding their scope of the world.

Work Cited

Ondaatje, Michael. The English Patient. Toronto: Vintage-Random, 1993. Print.