



THE CONCEPT OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND VISION OF A GLOBAL VILLAGE IN THE NOVELS OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE

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ABSTRACT

Nationality, identity, ethnicity, migration and war are some of major issues which become the centre of all Ondaatje's novels. However dealing with such issues is not the motif of his writing of literature. Since being a true philanthropist Ondaatje wants to highlight the disaster related to such issues and ultimately comes forward with an ultimate solution of all these problems in the form of his **VISION OF A GLOBAL VILLAGE**. The present paper is an effort to discuss in detail the practical approach towards all worldly problems and their solutions inherited in his vision.

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"A person who is eager for war is blind. He never looks at the enemy. He only projects the enemy. When a battle is raging within, enemies appear on the outside."

-Inner War and Peace by "Osho"

Watkins Publishing, London.

The above mentioned quotation is one of the major keys to understand the theme of all his major novels. Ondaatje deals with various issues related to national and international matters in his novels. The different issues which Ondaatje discusses in his novels ultimately relates to his vision of a global village. Whatever problems human beings face in personal as well as national level are most of the time the results of the concept of division and man's

hunger for power, name and fame. Ondaatje keenly observes and experiences all these problems and therefore supports the concept of globalization as an effective remedy for all of them.

Ondaatje does not just talk about his vision of a global village but also work on this direction. Even after being a Diaspora and migrant himself he never confines his novels towards the sufferings of his place as a migrant. All his novels are evidence to this fact. In each of his novels he talks about not only one country or the suffering of one national but in order to make his vision global, he deals with several nations whether European or British. Being a true lover of humanity he elucidates the suffering of all human beings.



In the Skin of a Lion is his next novel in which he analyses the contribution and sufferings of Canadian and Macedonian migrants in building the city. The sequel of *In the Skin of a Lion* is his *The English Patient* which made him famous in the global level as a literary legend. *The English Patient* which won him the Booker for his exceptionally good readership of the theme of sufferings of human beings due to migration, nationality, ethnicity and war. In *The English Patient* he talks about the European and Asian people and their difficulties and trauma. The novel which followed *The English Patient* is *Anil's Ghost*. In this novel Ondaatje mainly focuses on the historical Sri Lankan civil war for insubstantial reasons. He also observes minutely the pain and utter state of grief of a common Sri Lankan and his/her helplessness to free him from it. In his next novel he gives absolutely a different theme to show the connectivity among human beings living in different parts of the world through the characters of Anna and the French poet Lucien Segura on whom she does her research.

In *Divisadero*, through the identical experiences of Anna and the French poet Lucien Segura, Ondaatje wants to convey a common occurrence in life that it does not differentiate between human beings while giving them the same experiences in life. Anna and Segura are two separate entities in the world, one belonging to California and the other from France yet they both are connected through their way of experience. To quote a critic, "Divisadero Street is Anna's address in San Francisco. The Spanish root verb can mean both to divide and to "gaze from a distance". Anna realises, "I look into the distance for the people I have lost so I see them everywhere." Ondaatje tenderly fights such loss, and again rescues these strangers to history, forming a cast from their silent lives which we can now look in to."¹

The English Patient also supports the same philosophy by portraying the connection between two individuals connection even after being separated for many years. Hana drops a fork in Canada and Kip catches a bowl in one of the Indian villages.

Smyrl comments on the concept of urgency of universal brotherhood as the solution to all these

problems, introduced and insisted by Ondaatje in the novel *The English Patient* and quotes, "Kip presages a new form of self-knowledge that will emerge from the decentralization of cultural and political influence, suggested by the sleeping English patient. He struggles through the narrative to control the interpretation of his own experiences and actions...."²

Almost all his novels deals with the issues related to identity crisis and its erasure. *The English Patient*, *Anil's Ghost* and *In the Skin of a Lion* basically highlight the problems created by these notions. His Booker awarded novel revolves round four major characters that are displaced from their homeland because of one or the other reason. They all meet with each other in an abandoned Italian villa. The villa is absolutely damaged due to war. It is also full of dangers as the allies have hidden bomb in many places. The villa symbolises the abandonment of the characters physical and psychological self due to war. The way war and the concept of nationhood and identity has damaged the villa is also revealed, the characters are also presented as living with lost selves after losing not only their near and dear ones but their desire to live.

Ondaatje discusses statelessness as a major issue of dispute in today's world which has become a big fact behind the suffering of millions of human beings who are living in different parts of the world for years together without being accepted by the main stream. Ondaatje ironically call them "international bastards" and this is how he also expresses his own anguish of being a multinational. Wikipedia explains statelessness as, "...an international problem in which an individual has no formal or protective relationship with any state.....if a person's parents are nationals of separate countries, and the mother's country rejects all offspring of mothers married to foreign fathers, but the father's country rejects all offspring born to foreign mothers..."³

Ondaatje condemns the idea of nationality and insists on a desperate need of a global village which is the ultimate solution of the problem. He rejects the concept of division on earth and its maps since these divisions are the major cause of human suffering. In his utter anguish he states, "The ends of



the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence...."⁴

Although the theme of war has been dealt with in detail by Ondaatje in his prominent novels *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*, he gives plenty of stuff about his vision of a global village. That vision which is unlike war and its aftermath is based on his strong belief in the purest and truest emotions of love and compassion. He never forgets to talk about the value of personal relationships between human beings. He also talks about the value of personal relationships between human beings which are not controlled by hatred, jealousy, selfishness and so on. In *The English Patient* all the major characters are shown living their life together with selfless love and compassion towards each other, whether it is father-daughter relationship between Hana and Almasy, or the man woman relationship between Hana and Kip. In order to support his vision of a global village Ondaatje focuses on love as the effective medicine to cure the people suffering from traumas related to nationhood, identity, war, marginalisation and so on. He also concentrates on love's ability to go beyond time and place and geographical boundaries. In his novels, love serves as the remedy to overcome trauma. The true love relationship of Hana and Kip, Almasy and Katherine, different sort of attachment between Sarath and Anil is nothing but an attempt of Ondaatje to show that "love" which is the most important requirement of life knows no confinement. It does not believe in any boundaries and can happen anytime and anywhere. In the case of Kip and Hana, Kip falls in love with Hana even after realizing that she belongs to the class of imperialists. Hana also loves Kip truly unlike his countrymen who could not acknowledge his contribution made to save the lives of British. To quote a critic:

One theme that emerges in the novel is that love... love transcends even death, as the characters hold onto their emotions even past the grave. This idea implies a larger message—that time and place themselves are irrelevant to human connection..... Maps and geography become details, mere artificial lines that man imposes on the landscape. It is only the truth in the soul,

which transcends time that matters in the novel.⁵

Ondaatje discusses all the themes related to his vision of a global village very minutely. In the series of providing different solutions to the problem he gives another factor that is books, knowledge and wisdom. Ondaatje is of the opinion that books can play a major role to make the world learn the lesson of oneness. Reading books bring people of different part of the world closer to each other. In the novels of Ondaatje books have been shown playing a very important role in the lives of human beings. Books are not just the reading material but a great source of knowledge. This knowledge plays a comprehensive role to make people conscious and aware about the facts of life. In *The English Patient* different characters like Hana, Almasy, Caravaggio and Kip find books a way to console their war torn souls. Not only have this books guided them whenever they felt misguided.

In one scene, Hana is shown to fix the steps in a staircase in the villa. Ondaatje writes, "The staircase had lost its lower steps during the fire that was set before the soldiers left." She brought "twenty books and nailed them to the floor and then onto each other, in this way rebuilding the two lowest steps."⁸ Abu Baker interprets the symbolical meaning of the scene in his *Maps in Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient*, "Hana's use of the books to fix the stairs parallels the readers' and critics' attempt to "nail" all the different books and images Ondaatje refers to in his novel to reach, as if climbing a staircase, into the 'room' where knowledge is stored."⁶ Another critic Santwana Haldar also observes the healing impact of books on the traumatic souls of war torn characters in the villa "As Hana reads one book after another, following the instruction of the patient, she developed an urge for life. Her attempts to plant beans in one corner of the wild garden, suspected to be a hiding place for unexplored mines, suggest her newfound zeal."⁷

Ondaatje focuses on Hana's decision to live in an abandoned Italian villa with her almost burned patient Almasy. She looks after Almasy in memory of her father who died unattended. Hana does it as an act of redemption. It consoles her injured soul and a sense of guilt which keeps on making her realize that



due to war she couldn't look after her father when he was dying unattended. Through this relationship Ondaatje shows the power of love and pure human emotions which make people to forget their differences based on nationality and identity. The power of this love makes them to raise above all boundaries and love all human beings in a selfless manner. The way Hana takes care of the burned patient by telling him stories, feeding him with his own hands with love shows Ondaatje's observation that when people love truly they don't bother about the trivial boundaries of race, nations and identity. They simply love other human beings.

Ondaatje's treatment of love relationship between Hana and Kip is basically dealt by him to support his vision of a global village. Kip whose real name is Kirpal Singh in the novel is basically an Indian Sikh who joined British Army out of his own will. In taking this decision he goes against the wish of his real brother who is of the opinion that the westerners are selfish people and that they cannot be faithful to other communities and non white races.

Kip who is alienated during war fighting for the British army has been shown reviving his lost self after meeting the three characters in the villa. Ondaatje deliberately projects this meeting to show the love of strangers towards each other. Santwana Haldar's closely analyzes, "After his arrival in the villa he seemed casually content with the small group of three persons. It was like a holiday for him "after the war of mud and rivers and bridges....."⁸

For Kip no boundary was a matter of fact as shown in the novel. It was only after the bomb dropping event that he realizes the significance and negative impact of geographical boundaries in the lives of human beings. This was the moment he starts believing in the concept of nationality. However he is more than hurt on this event. Here Kip's reaction towards the bomb dropping event is a symbol of his love towards humanity and the hatred he burst out with against the Europeans is actually against the one with power and a desire to dominate the weaker nations and continents of world through violence. Therefore Ondaatje in particular is not against any particular nation, what he actually opposes is the concentration of power and its misuse.

Ondaatje's optimistic approach and hope for a global village is expressed clearly when he comments, "In spite of the burned earth, in spite of the lack of water, someday there would a bower of limes, rooms of green light."⁹ Hana's efforts of planting beans symbolises the dream of Ondaatje of a global village. Ondaatje very keenly conveys his vision of a global village in the given lines, by comparing feeling of love and emotion with that of water which is essential to life. Like water life cannot take place, without love affection and true feelings towards each other there is no humanity possible. He conveys here that feeling of pure and selfless love towards human beings make a person complete and gives his existence a real meaning; therefore the differences on the basis of nationhood, ethnicity, race and so on must not be given any importance.

The vision of Michael Ondaatje's a global village is clearly seen in *The English Patient's* protagonist Almasy's view. Almasy being an explorer of the desert and a mapmaker ultimately shows his desire of not being marked by his identity of the nationality, race, and other social frames which limit, label and frame him. Again his love for the desert reveals his wish to live in a similar condition. He states that, "We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead.....all I desired was to walk upon such an earth that has no maps."¹⁰

It can be considered as a strange wish for a mapmaker to live on "as earth that has no maps." The desert as a symbol reduces people to their common humanity. Its "cartography" is the 'true' form of labelling to Almasy, who is against the racist labelling of others.

In order to support his vision Ondaatje through his novels conveys the fact that war which basically takes place on the issues of geographical boundaries gives nothing which can be taken as positive. It is war only which make people forget their differences, and compel them to look at this world from a global perspective. People start realizing that human lives are above all boundaries, all ethnicities, above all sorts of divisions among human beings, divisions of caste, colour, creed and so on.



The major hurdle in Ondaatje's vision of a global village is the concept of boundaries. *The English Patient* has realised the truth and reality behind the concept of identity. Therefore he deliberately hides his identity from the people around him. During the custody of British army "He had rambled on, driving them mad, traitor or ally, leaving them never quite sure who he was"¹¹ (p.96). Ondaatje does not provide a proper identity to his central character of the novel. Abu Baker very aptly analyses the character of *The English Patient* and Ondaatje's desire to focus on a global village by representing the cons as the utmost outcome of the notion related to distinctiveness.

Like the desert, the identity of *The English Patient* is without fixed contours. The colour of his skin, a racial marker, is burnt away. He is Hungarian yet he is mistaken for an Englishman...His identity is erased and he becomes the anonymous English patient. Consequently, he attains the freedom of transcending borders between nations, even transcending ethnicity and identity.¹²

When Caravaggio tries to convince her many a time that the patient whom they knew as English patient is not actually English she answers very casually being indifferent about his identity that it does not matter at all since the war is over. Now it is very well seen that through the character of Hana Ondaatje wants to convey the thought that all the concepts of identities and relation to a particular nationality becomes irrelevant for those who have observed war and issues related to it ".....Through *The English Patient*, we can see that wars bring out the true self, the experiences that one could never forget, and strong bonds between comrades that are true and everlasting."¹³

Here Ondaatje differentiates between the hatred which is the root of war and love which is nothing but an outcome of war itself. On one hand war causes suspicion, uncertainty, eternal pain, and hatred, on the other hand Ondaatje with the help of his portrayal of peace and tranquillity in the monastery where all four major characters are living with great harmony, even after belonging to different countries and having different identities asserts that love conquers all. At one hand where war makes

people to be suspicious towards each other the feeling of harmony and concern help them to heal their wounded soul. To quote a critic, "The commander who chopped off Caravaggio's thumbs represents the general fears of being betrayed. This suspicion is contrasted with the peaceful aura in the monastery where knowledge of the others' character forms a trust between tours."¹⁴

Ondaatje wishes to erase all boundaries between nations by erasing all the identities be it related to nation, ethnicity or any concept of division to make the world a global village. However he is aware about the troubles which fall on the way of anybody who goes ahead with the concept of oneness. The troubles and dilemmas in the life of the English patient are basically introduced by Ondaatje to symbolise it.

The two names Almasy and *The English Patient* possess two concepts which are entirely different from each other. Almasy who achieved mastery in map making and keeps himself always engaged in it, enjoys it always but as the English patient after experiencing the bitterness starts disliking it thoroughly. He takes the example of two opposite sides of binaries. Using the two opposite sides of a binary Ondaatje wishes to convey that having the knowledge of a particular thing is good but if the same knowledge is misused in any way it should be dispensed with. This notion of division deserves hatred not on human beings but on the different criteria of divisions. Abu Baker observes, "These two selves form the binary opposition English patient/Almásy, which in turn justifies the differences between the two characters."¹⁵

War and other things lose significance when people want to become evolved and emancipated. Ondaatje proves the theory with example of eye ceremony of Buddha in his novel *Anil's Ghost*. John Bolland observes:

...in his great compassion he surveyed the world with his Buddha-eye, intent on giving it peace. When, however, he saw on the one side the world lost in low views and confused efforts, thickly covered with the dirt of the passions, and saw on the other side the exceeding subtlety of the Dharma of emancipation, he felt inclined to take no



action. But when he weighed up the significance of the pledge to enlighten all beings...he became again more favourable to the idea of proclaiming the path to Peace.¹⁶

In the novel *Anil's Ghost* Ondaatje uses spirituality to prove his concept of global village. According to the Buddhist philosophy the world is full of doubts and human beings are not capable of getting a clear vision in their lives unless or until they are enlightened with supreme knowledge of the fatality of materialistic world. The Buddhist concept which has been used by Ondaatje in *Anil's Ghost* raises a very important question which says, "...whether this vision of the world is human or divine, whether it is the product of spiritual detachment or physical engagement, or both.Although it is in a state of imminent collapse and disintegration, under the compassionate eye of Ananda-Buddha it achieves unity through a common involvement in the process of change."¹⁷

Many critics are also of the opinion that the vision of Ondaatje is crucially needed if human beings are really concerned about rising above the triviality of life and making it meaningful, peaceful and issueless. Human beings need to understand the fact of life that it is always uncertain and undisclosed, and when life has this much of uncertainty the fighting for places, names, and identities is but worthless. Baudrillard suggests in *Illusion of the End*, "We know only the signs of catastrophe; we no longer know the signs of destiny."¹⁸

John Bolland supports the vision of Ondaatje. The novel *Anil's Ghost* suggests that this vision can help people in many ways. This is one of major remedies to heal people suffering from trauma of war and its aftermath. This vision helps people in other ways as well. Once enlightened human beings understand the true meaning of life and focus on the same. Bolland aptly observes, "The Buddhist vision denies purpose and fatality of the phenomenal world, seeing it as condemned to an endless process of becoming extinction ...the disparate localized instances of grief and trauma can be reconstituted and reconsecrated in a universal relationality."¹⁹ Ondaatje seems to prove in his *Anil's Ghost* the insubstantiality of the concept of division. The

clashes between Tamil Migrants and the local Sinhalese in Sri Lanka were not in existence from the very beginning when Tamils came there. There was a time when they both led a peaceful life when there was no concept of division or discrimination between these two communities. It was only after the imperialist rule and the announcement made by one of the first prime ministerial candidate Bandaranaike that this clash on the basis of difference arose. Giving a detailed account of the golden Sri Lankan past John Bolland comments, "Recent historiographic research has shown that this nationalist ideology distorted Sri Lanka's past, in which there was peaceful coexistence between Tamils and Sinhala, with some of the country's great dynasties being Tamil."²⁰

The character of Palipana is the biggest example to reveal the futility of war. Palipana Sarath's teacher was earlier fighting from the Sinhalese' side, however, after losing all his family members and facing a critical trauma, he realised the overall destruction related to war and the concepts of division and identity. Bolland opines, "Palipana's withdrawal from nationalistic controversies is a particularly important point in the narrative, since it aligns the novel with a distrust of those competing Buddhist and Hindu nationalist ideologies which had begun and continues to influence the inter-ethnic violence in Sri Lanka."²¹

Palipana's character is one of major symbols used by Ondaatje to show the trivialities and destruction hidden behind the concept of war and violence. John Bolland analyses the character of Palipana and the symbolism used by Ondaatje to support his vision of a Global village, in detail, "It is interesting that Palipana's name is a compound of Pali, the ancient language of Sinhalese Buddhism, and *panna*, the Pali word for the highest wisdom achieved by the sage. He is associated with the Sinhalese Nationalist Movement, which began in the nineteenth century under the leadership of Anagarika Dharmapala."²²

Before this period Sri Lanka which has been named by different invaders in different ages used to be a peaceful place. It was only under the British colonialism that the conditions in Sri Lanka started deteriorating. Bolland again quotes, "..... At the time of independence the movement developed into an



exclusive Sinhalese-Buddhist view of Sri Lanka's past, in which the country's destiny was seen in terms of preserving the purity of the Buddhist religion. were used to support Sinhalese nationalist ideology.....It marginalized the role of the minority Tamils by presenting the past as heroic Sinhalese resistance to Hindu-Tamil invaders.”²³

This way Ondaatje follows a religious approach to make his concept of division more practical. He gives the example of Buddha and Buddhist philosophy of peace and oneness to support the concept of his vision of a global village. Buddhist philosophy exposes the uncertainty and triviality of life and the materialistic world. According to this philosophy the materialistic thinking of human beings is the major cause of suffering. As mentioned in Bhagavad-Gita “the greatest Hindu epic” the main reason of suffering in the lives of human beings is the desire of possession.

In order to support his philosophy of global village more profoundly Ondaatje also adopts an intellectual approach towards life. This intellectual approach of Ondaatje rejects the concepts of history and reality. People keep fighting throughout their life in the name of identity related to things, geographical boundaries, caste and so on. However if we look closely life does not justify the concept of reality and history and truth. Truth itself keeps changing. Two people when they love each other love is all encompassing, it is but only for the time being, since life moves on and they find that after some time their emotions towards each other are replaced by their responsibility, therefore while talking about his vision Ondaatje seems to revise the ultimate truth of life as mentioned in Bhagavad-Gita which says “change is the law of nature”.

Through his novels he wants to convey the message to the whole world to live in peace with one another and not ostracize any particular race. Ondaatje expresses his sadness on the issues of division by making of maps. He seems to question through his novels the beginning of making maps since maps are the imaginary lines drawn to divide the earth, the lines of divisions they create in the mindset and hearts of human beings are more real and destructive. Ondaatje through his novels wants to convey a message to society that man made

divisions are not necessary if they are not doing anything other than dividing people. For Ondaatje “Maps in Freudian sense are the super ego imposed upon nature”,²⁴ He writes in the novel *The English Patient*, “.....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. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps.”²⁵

Through his novels Ondaatje wants to convey the message that even after being born on this earth, being a part of this earth, enjoying all the beauties of the earth, getting sustenance from the earth, human beings do not have a belongingness with the earth, they want to own the earth, possess the earth and forget that it is earth to which they owe everything.

The sense of unity is another way to help people overcome trauma in their life and escape problems created by the concepts of division. Ondaatje gives ample instances where this sense of unity has been shown to help people to forget their so called differences. “The four main characters “way of being connected” to each other forms the basis of the novel, demonstrating an emotional shift in Ondaatje's work that completely refuses...the insistence on separateness.”²⁶

However, the fact that the characters are experiencing the horrors of the war together has helped them cope with the trauma. They have become a community, dependent on each other's company.

The community that shares a traumatic experience in the novel condemns the war together. For instance, Hana, Kip, Caravaggio, and *The English Patient* are residing in an unfamiliar place and are all adjusting to the weather, food, and the overall way of life during a war, along with their traumatic experience. Caravaggio believes that the relationships among Hana, Kip, and his own self can provide their means for escaping the war and eventually its haunting memory.

With the help of his novels Ondaatje make people realise the emptiness of these words which are there only to discriminate one from another on



the basis of the concepts which at times brings nothing but ruin and utter destruction. This is the concept which ultimately strikes the novelist and he wants to highlight with the story of people from different backgrounds in the very middle of war. In the words of Bussy, "The war has managed to tear many people apart, but has brought Kip, Hana, Caravaggio, and *The English Patient* together in a decrepit villa in Italy, just north of Florence in Tuscany."²⁷

The villa represents neither the world nor the characters' home; it is just somewhere where they can temporarily deny and escape their problems. It is simple, secure, and solitary. They are not faced with questions about what went on during the war that returning home would prompt, nor do they have to perform the social etiquettes that they left behind for the war. Instead, they sit in silence, play the piano, think, and read to escape the war and their home. "The desert, and equally the villa [...] are extreme examples of unhomey, life-threatening spaces [...] and are] both are positive metaphors for the shedding of the conventional commitment to national and personal identity and the related abandonment of narrative certainty and closure."²⁸ As one postcolonial theorist states about such spaces, "In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting."²⁹

Ondaatje wishes to focus on the concept of international brotherhood and oneness and expresses that no matter how many lines of demarcation and divisions are drawn by human beings to be happy and safe, eventually they all lead to nothing but war and destruction. These lines of demarcation to which we give the name of nationality, ethnicity and so on ultimately serves as a barrier to keep human beings distinct from each other.

War which has been dealt as the major theme is said to be the outcome of Euro centrism by many critics. To quote Bussy, "Through the techniques of new historicism and post colonialism, [it is seen] that the novel rejects Euro centrism and focuses on the human relationships that form,

regardless of the political and social connotations associated with names/labels, bodies, or places."³⁰ Ondaatje raises his voice against Euro centrism in which the developed continents keep imposing their decisions on the less developed or developing nations. In the words of John Bolland, "Where the perspectives of all participants, including Western observers, are shown to be partial and motivated by self-interest, the novel asks from what position can a calculus of guilt be established to submit to international tribunals-how can punishment be administered when all have blood on their hands? The temptation is to lapse into relativism."³¹

He wants to convey his long cherished desire of oneness and brotherhood and his vision of a global village which is the ultimate, long lasting and human solution of the problem. Ondaatje insists that these lines of demarcation should be removed.

Ondaatje follows an optimistic approach towards life and observes the bright side of human beings which becomes obvious during war. He proves in his novels that though war is always horrid and frightening but during war as well there are human beings who believe in the strength of love and sacrifice. War gives only pain of all sorts whereas love is there to heal and comfort the injured body, mind and soul of the war victims. This is how Ondaatje proves the superiority and power of love over war. To quote a critic, "*The English Patient*, we can see that wars bring out the true self, the experiences that one could never forget, and strong bonds between comrades that are true and everlasting. It is ironic that love can occur in hate or war, but this love is everlasting and all-conquering. This is due to the hardship and barriers that they overcame to be together."³²

Ondaatje's treatment of war and focus on war is basically to show the negativity lying in all aspects of war and therefore his attempt to prove the power and value of love. Ondaatje draws plenty of characters in his novels and elucidate that it is not war, hatred or the feeling of revenge, but the true love which made people win not a particular area but the entire world. To quote the same critic:

Love is shown to be the truest and most lasting during times of war. Amidst times of difficulty, *Almásy* and *Katharine* are able to



develop a sensational relationship that is both romantic and inextricably complicated. In *Kip and Hana's* case, love is born through simple things in life. This love is not infatuation but is a sense of attachment and bond towards the other. Difficulties in life bring people's communication and understanding of each other to a deeper level, because of the true self brought out during times of danger. For example, the desert storm that brings out the hidden feelings of the couple. This contrasts with *Almásy* and *Katharine* when they were avoiding each other at a time of superficial masks and safety is assured in Cairo.³³

In order to make his vision of a global village stronger Ondaatje also focuses equally on the concept of nationality. Through his handling with the theme of nationality Ondaatje ultimately wants to reveal the depressing effects concealing behind the glamour and sensation which nationality introduces. In order to bring to light the insubstantiality of the concept of nationhood and identity global Ondaatje draws many characters in his novels. Kip and Almasy have been drawn by Ondaatje consciously to reveal the injustice done by the imperialists in the name of nationhood and identity. Kip is ready to expose new horizons and identities for himself while leaving India to join British army during Second World War whereas Almasy who was enthusiastic as Kip while enjoying his profession of a cartographer. However both of them when confront with the bitter reality of the nations which they were working for realizes that the notion of identity is strong enough to crush their zeal in new countries and places. This is how Ondaatje puts them together on a single platform and similarizes their situation by calling them ironically "international bastards". Shannon Smyrl writes, "*The English Patient's* response is to try to produce a singular identity definitive of the new decentralizing global culture. He posits a unified identity characterized by difference and rootlessness. The differences between his and Kip's experiences become insignificantthus neutralizes the nascent opportunity, represented in Kip, for a new

understanding of identity organized around difference and disunity."³⁴

In Anil's Ghost Ondaatje gives plenty of examples to show the strength of selfless love. The characters in Anil's Ghost like Gamini, Sarath, and Palipana experience in their course of life that running after the notions of revenge and hatred in the name of history, ethnicity, and language and so on ultimately results in nothingness. Who so ever fights eventually loses. There is always a sense of loss amidst the win.

In order to make his vision more practical Ondaatje suggests the path of religion. Anil's Ghost deals the religion of Buddhism and the power lying behind its theories which tells that the ultimate happiness lies in loving and caring for other human beings without any self. It also gives the message of compassion and its value to make the lives of human beings peaceful and meaningful. The two characters of Gamini and Palipana are drawn by Ondaatje to convey his message of love and compassion in two different ways. John Bolland critically observes the motive of Ondaatje to use the Buddhism religion to make his theories more practical.

If Sarath's distinguishing feature is his detachment from the world, his brother Gamini is associated with the Buddhist quality of *karuna*, compassion, shown in an active involvement in the world. After rejecting the social forms demanded by his wife and her family as part of an illusory worldGamini grasps "the truth of their times" (128). He sees through the motives of power and patriotism (119) and finds no sense in the civil war situation.³⁵

Ondaatje looks at both side of the coin of truth related to differences among human beings and its repercussions. At the same time he also focuses on the realization of truth and forms of knowledge in human beings after realising the fact hidden behind the philosophy of war. The two brothers Sarath and Gamini are the symbols used by Ondaatje to give the message of love and sacrifice for all human beings as the ultimate truth of nature. Therefore Gamini in the novel has been shown many a times symbolising



Ondaatje's belief in oneness and rejecting the concept of division and boundaries.

Ondaatje gives the message of universal brotherhood in both of his war centred novels. In the novel *Anil's Ghost*, when the rebels in Sri Lanka were kidnapping people, including doctors, Ondaatje reveals the other aspect of human nature –courage and daring-which is also as true as the violent one.

Meanwhile, far away in the south, there were other interruptions. Insurgents entered the Ward Place Hospital in Colombo and killed a doctor and two of his assistants. They had come looking for one patient. 'Where is so and so?' they had asked. 'I don't know.' There was bedlam. After finding the patient, they pulled out long knives and cut him into pieces then they threatened the nurses and demanded they not come to work anymore. The next day the nurses returned, not in uniforms but in frocks and slippers. There were gunmen on the roof of the hospital. There were informers everywhere. But the ward place hospital remained open.³⁶

In the above given passage, one comes to know about the daring nature of the nurses of a war torn hospital. It is also worth noting that even after receiving life threat given by the insurgents not to return to the hospital, how the nurses and other common people keep serving the wounded and needy ones without any benefit. The way hospital nurses keep coming to the hospital in order to save the war victims is really commendable and also gives the message of love and sacrifice to humanity. They serve without being bothered of their so called ethnicity, identity, and languages. John Bolland comments:

In the forest scenes, Anil is informed by Palipana of "the distinction between the gross material world and the 'subtle' material world" (86), and this forms the basis of a debate between Western and Eastern theories of knowledge...Enlightenment comes from a proper grasp of reality, the recognition that all objects of perception are based on

emptiness; they are a web of interdependent, baseless phenomena in a perpetual state of flux, and it is wrong to make them the object of knowledge or desire.Anil holds on to a positivist epistemology and a liberal ideology: "We use the bone to search for it. 'The truth shall set you free.' I believe that."³⁷

In order to make his vision of a global village more practical and possible, Ondaatje uses the religious aspects of the matter. The episode of Buddha as shown in *Anil's Ghost* in which Ananda the sculptor has been shown to shape the statue of Buddha is one of such efforts. Ananda paints the eyes of Buddha which is a heavenly experience for Ananda since this act gives him a kind of healing effect. "The Buddhist account of the awakening of the heavenly eye provides a paradigm more acceptable to the moral imagination.....t offers compassion, not retribution, and the promise of emancipation through setting the self free from a life process founded on blind craving."³⁸

Ondaatje suggests that people can lead a happy and peaceful life if they have knowledge and wisdom. Palipana Sarath's spiritual teacher is one of such examples. Ondaatje shows the power of love and compassion in making a human life meaningful and peaceful.

The framing passages of Buddhism at the beginning and end of *Anil's Ghost* link impermanence with the dissolution of fire — "Nothing last," Palipana told them... 'Art burns, dissolves'" (12; emphasis in original); "It was the figure of the world the statue [of the Buddha] would see forever, in rain light and sunlight, a combustible world" (306) — and the theme of dissolution becomes a recurrent motif in the novel, linking the private and public.³⁹

Ondaatje accepts the fact that consciously, he has included the concept of nationality and its role in destroying human beings by playing negatively with their emotions, their dreams and so on. In an interview with IPS (Inter Press Service) when asked the question, "IPS: Another theme that can be detected in your work is the virtual erasing of



national borders. Again, is this purposeful or done subconsciously during the writing and editing process?" To this Ondaatje answers, "I think it's more conscious."⁴⁰ IPS

Nevertheless with the passing of time after spending days with each other they tend to forget their differences related to different geographical, cultural and national differences. With their stay in the villa they get everything which they have lost due to war. Hana gets Almasy and Caravaggio as their father and care taker, she gets Kip who compensates her dead lover. It is Kip, the Indian sapper in the villa with whom Hana falls in love and revives her lost vigour, her sense of a young girl. She takes care of Kip and in return gets the same. At this time there is no difference of boundaries related to nations between them. She becomes normal again. If seen from Hana's perspective, Almasy, the burned patient is not a burden for him but an emotional support. Here Ondaatje represents the general contradiction related to war. At one place where war has taken her father she nurses Almasy without bothering about his identity.

Kip understands very well that the sense of superiority of European nations over Asia is the major cause of the deteriorating relationships between them. Even though he joins British Army against the wish of his brother and keeps trying to adjust with them. However the discrimination which he receives there was enough to convert his heart full of hope into regretting and frustrated one. Although Kip maintains his silence against the discrimination he was suffering from and maintain good relationship with the people in the villa until he hears the news of atomic bomb being dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *Bussy* Comments:

Kip is directly acknowledging the ability of white nations to impose their Euro centrism upon the world. Up until the news of the bombs, Kip has been satisfied living in Europe with three members of white nations. The dropping of the atomic bombs, which killed approximately 140,000 people, many of whom were civilians, emphasizes the hierarchy of worth placed upon certain nations. Kip's interpretation of dropping the bombs is one that has usually been ignored

throughout "history" due to its origin in "otherness," but in this instance, his personal disgust for those who feed elitism becomes evident to him.⁴¹

Ondaatje through the Character of Kip and his anguish after the bomb dropping event reveals the exploitation and never acknowledged sacrifices of the Asians by imperialists. M *Bussy* further observes the message in detail conveyed by Ondaatje through the bomb dropping event and comments on this anger of Kip:

Kip is acknowledging and criticizing the Euro centrism that has spread worldwide. Italy is no longer a place where Kip feels that he can escape his "otherness," or the war, following the dropping of the bombs on Japan. Like Ondaatje himself, who was born in Sri Lanka, as an Indian, Kip was born in an Asian country--India is Asian, like Japan-- and therefore Kip takes the attack personally. Kip leaves the English patient in bed, after threatening his life, and returns to India at the end of the novel. He has given up his hope that white nations would respect him equally, and returns to a place where his skin is less foreign. Returning home does not diminish the impact that Europe, the war, and the other characters have made upon Kip's identity. Instead, his experience throughout the novel has assured Kip that he would always have an inferior "place" in a Eurocentric world and therefore he belongs in India.⁴²

In his *In the Skin of a Lion* Ondaatje exemplifies his hope and glimpses of his vision of a global village with the example of the relationship between Patrick and the Macedonian migrant workers. In the novel when Patrick was not accepted at all by his own countrymen, Macedonian migrants gave him a hand of friendship and support. Winfried Siemerling gives a detailed account of all this, "When he works in the tunnels under Lake Ontario that are needed for the new waterworks, he moves into the neighbourhood of the Macedonians and Bulgarians who are his colleagues, and begins to perceive



similarities between the contrasting worlds of self and other.”⁴⁴

Ondaatje's vision of a global village comes to its full extent in the sacrifice of life made by Sarath. Sarath sacrifices his life by going against his own government and for a lady who was working for another country. Here Ondaatje reveals that humanity and selfless love is above all. It is above from all manmade boundaries, or concepts of nationhood and identity or religion or ethnicity. The sacrifice of Sarath reveals Ondaatje's message to ordinary human beings as well as to the supreme authorities of all nations whether big or small that love is the only feeling which is the real weapon in the hands of any living being which can help him/her to conquer the world. He also wants to convey that if anybody really wants to dominate the world then he has to learn love everyone selflessly.

Having a practical and psychological understanding of human beings in general and Sri Lankans in particular, Ondaatje possesses a universal and a far more practical approach towards war when compared to the other Diasporas novelists. It is well known that after one year of the publication of the novel the same incident became the part of Sri Lanka's official history. The war loses the sense of trust among human beings. They become suspicious. True love makes people trustworthy and develops harmony and peace among human beings even of different nations and backgrounds. To quote a critic, "This suspicion is contrasted with the peaceful aura in the monastery where knowledge of the others' character forms a trust among the four. Ondaatje does to illustrate that in war, people should unite. The union of the spirits bring tranquillity and peace which is exemplified in the Monastery.”⁵⁷

Ondaatje discusses all the themes very minutely in order to make his vision of a global village more practical. He focuses how Hana decides to live in an abandoned Italian villa with her almost burned patient Almasy. She looks after Almasy in memory of her father who died unattended. Hana does it as an act of redemption. It consoles her injured soul and a sense of guilt which keeps on making her realize that due to war she couldn't look after her father when he was dying unattended. Through this relationship Ondaatje shows the power of love, a pure human

emotions which make people to forget their differences. The power of this love makes them to rise above all boundaries and selflessly love to all human beings.

Therefore in his novels Ondaatje rejects the notion of division in all means and proves his vision of a global village as the remedy to all the problems related to migration, nationhood, identity, ethnicity, war, trauma and so on.

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