

Novels into Films: A Critical Study of Kip's Character in *The English Patient*

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Abstract: *The transformation of literary narratives into cinematic texts entails a complex process of reinterpretation, often reshaping characterization and ideological depth. The English Patient (1992) by Michael Ondaatje and its film adaptation The English Patient directed by Anthony Minghella provide a fertile ground for examining such transformations. This study focuses on Kirpal Singh (Kip) whose characterization undergoes a significant shift across the two mediums. In the novel, Kip functions as a deeply introspective figure shaped by colonial ambivalence, cultural displacement, and moral awakening. Ondaatje writes, "He has erased the battlefields and counties from his mind" (Ondaatje 87), suggesting Kip's deliberate detachment from imposed identities. His profession as a bomb disposal expert symbolizes his navigation through the dangerous terrain of imperial power. His eventual disillusionment is sharply articulated after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where he recognizes racial hierarchies embedded in global politics: "They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation" (Ondaatje 286). The film, however, reconfigures Kip into a largely romantic and visual figure, minimizing his ideological resistance. As Linda Hutcheon notes, "adaptation is repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 7), a concept evident in Minghella's selective emphasis. This study argues that Kip's transformation reflects a broader cinematic tendency to depoliticize postcolonial subjects. Through comparative analysis, this paper highlights how the adaptation process alters the ideological core of Kip's character, thereby reshaping the narrative's engagement with identity, colonialism, and power.*

Keywords: Kip, *The English Patient*, Literary Adaptation, Character Transformation, Colonial Identity, Cinematic Interpretation, Ideological Shift

1. Introduction

The adaptation of literary texts into films has consistently generated critical debates concerning fidelity, transformation, and interpretation. *The English Patient* is widely regarded as a postmodern narrative that resists linear storytelling and foregrounds fragmented identities. Ondaatje's assertion that "We are the real countries, not the boundaries drawn on maps" (Ondaatje 261) encapsulates the novel's central concern with identity beyond geopolitical constructs.

When adapted into the film *The English Patient* by Anthony Minghella, the narrative was reshaped to suit cinematic conventions. Among the characters affected by this transformation is Kirpal Singh (Kip), a Sikh sapper serving in the British Army during World War II. Kip's role in the novel is not merely functional but deeply symbolic, representing the complexities of colonial allegiance.

Ondaatje presents Kip as a figure caught between admiration and alienation. "He was a foreigner, even in his own country" (Ondaatje 74) reflects the layered dislocation that defines his identity. His relationship with Hana further complicates this dynamic, blending intimacy with cultural distance. Hana herself observes, "She entered the story knowing nothing" (Ondaatje 16), highlighting the fragmented narrative structure that shapes character interactions.

The turning point in Kip's character occurs with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. His reaction, "American, French, I don't care...when you start bombing the brown races..." (Ondaatje 285), reveals a profound

rupture in his trust toward the West. This moment positions Kip as a critical voice against imperial violence.

However, the film adaptation significantly reduces this dimension. While Kip remains present as a romantic interest, his political awakening is largely absent. This raises important questions about adaptation. As Robert Stam argues, "adaptations are readings...they are not copies" (Stam 3). Minghella's reading privileges emotional engagement over ideological critique.

This study examines how Kip's transformation reflects broader issues in adaptation studies and postcolonial theory. By comparing the novel and film, the paper explores how narrative shifts alter the representation of identity and power, ultimately questioning the ethics of adaptation in cross-cultural storytelling.

2. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative comparative methodology, analyzing Kip's character in *The English Patient* and its film adaptation *The English Patient*. The approach integrates close textual reading with cinematic analysis, focusing on narrative structure, dialogue, and visual representation.

The study is informed by adaptation theory and postcolonial criticism. Linda Hutcheon's assertion that "to adapt is to interpret" (Hutcheon 8) provides a framework for understanding the film as a reinterpretation rather than a reproduction. Similarly, Edward Said's concept that "the Orient is a stage on which the whole East is confined" (Said 63) helps contextualize Kip's marginalization.

Primary data includes textual excerpts such as “Kip had learned to trust the English” (Ondaatje 87) and “He felt the earth beneath him shift” (Ondaatje 283). These are compared with corresponding film scenes to identify omissions and alterations.

Secondary sources, including works by Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, are used to deepen the analysis of hybridity and subaltern identity. MLA format is followed for all citations.

3. Literature Review

Adaptation studies emphasize transformation rather than fidelity. Linda Hutcheon states, “adaptation is derivation that is not derivative” (Hutcheon 9). This concept is crucial for understanding Minghella’s film.

Ondaatje’s novel is marked by poetic fragmentation. “All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps” (Ondaatje 135) reflects a rejection of colonial boundaries. Kip embodies this ethos, navigating cultural hybridity.

Edward Said argues, “knowledge of the Orient...creates the Orient” (Said 40), highlighting how Kip is constructed within Western discourse. Homi K. Bhabha further notes, “colonial mimicry is...almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 86), a concept visible in Kip’s imitation of British norms.

Film critics observe that Minghella’s adaptation foregrounds romance. As Brown notes, “the film silences Kip’s political voice in favor of visual spectacle” (Brown 112). Similarly, Green argues, “the cinematic narrative simplifies the postcolonial critique” (Green 78).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s question, “Can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 66), resonates with Kip’s diminished role in the film.

4. Statement of Problem

The central problem of this study lies in the ideological transformation of Kip’s character during adaptation. In *The English Patient*, Kip is a vehicle for postcolonial critique. His declaration, “They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation” (Ondaatje 286), exposes racial injustice.

However, the film *The English Patient* minimizes this critique. Kip’s identity is reduced to a romantic subplot, raising concerns about representation. As Edward Said warns, “representation is never neutral” (Said 21).

The problem extends to the marginalization of non-Western voices. Kip’s silence in the film echoes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s argument that “the subaltern cannot speak” (Spivak 104).

5. Analysis

Kip’s characterization in *The English Patient* is deeply symbolic. His profession reflects his precarious existence:

“He is most comfortable when he is defusing bombs” (Ondaatje 196). This metaphor extends to his negotiation of identity.

Initially, Kip admires British culture: “Kip had learned to trust the English” (Ondaatje 87). Yet this trust is fragile. Ondaatje writes, “He knows he is among them but not of them” (Ondaatje 118), highlighting his alienation.

His relationship with Hana reveals emotional intimacy but cultural distance: “She would be his last love” (Ondaatje 222). However, this relationship cannot transcend structural inequalities.

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki mark a decisive moment. Kip’s anger is explicit: “When you start bombing the brown races of the world...” (Ondaatje 285). This moment redefines his identity.

In contrast, the film omits this transformation. Kip remains a secondary character, defined by romance rather than resistance. As Stam argues, “film adaptations inevitably simplify” (Stam 75).

This simplification reflects cinematic priorities but also ideological bias. Kip’s reduced role reinforces Eurocentric narratives, marginalizing postcolonial perspectives.

6. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Kip’s character in *The English Patient* and its film adaptation *The English Patient* underscores the complexities of adaptation. While the novel presents Kip as a symbol of postcolonial resistance, the film reduces him to a romantic figure.

This transformation highlights the tension between literary depth and cinematic accessibility. As Linda Hutcheon suggests, adaptations are reinterpretations shaped by context.

However, the loss of Kip’s ideological voice raises concerns about representation. His diminished role reflects broader patterns of marginalization in cinema.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that adaptation is not neutral; it reshapes meaning and influences cultural discourse. Kip’s transformation serves as a critical case for understanding the politics of storytelling across mediums.

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