

Response to Prof. Miura Reiichi's
"Liberalism's Everybody's Revolution:
Cultural Politics in *The Catcher in the Rye*"

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Introduction

Today, Prof. Miura presented a fascinating paper that considered "the difference between memory and history," in which a "correct understanding of our past" would imply one universal truth to be sought, a gesture to look for "common memory" that would promote negotiation among different and plural memories. He discussed *The Catcher in the Rye* as a post-Auschwitz novel emerging out of the Cold War liberalism, as its protagonist would be so alert to the exclusion of minorities, who were persecuted in the most atrocious manner during the Holocaust. He thus defined Holden Caulfield as a cultural rebel, as the adolescent would hold his sensitivity high up against the American culture to be different from the identity the world imposes upon him, however slight his rebellion may be.

I would like to consider his claim that the Cold-War liberalism "makes us believe that the only effective politics is biopolitics" in relation to the post-Cold War novel, *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, published in 1992. Prof. Torgovnick has taken up the novel and its film version in her keynote speech yesterday and her stimulating book, *The War Complex*, as she discussed how representations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are elided in the Western memory. My interest in *The English Patient* in comparison with *The Catcher in the Rye* lies firstly in its treatment of racial identities, and secondly in the possibility of a cultural revolution therein, and I would like to find some link between the discussion by Prof. Miura and that by Prof. Torgovnick to clarify their points.

I. Racial Identities

The comparability of *The Catcher* and *The English Patient* is noticeable in their construction of history and racial identities. *The Catcher* was published during the dawning period of the Cold War and *The English Patient* was right after its conclusion. It is this historical context that determines the treatment or apparent non-treatment of the racial issue in both novels. Then, it is natural

to consider their relation to the race-targeted atrocities of World War II, the Holocaust and atomic bombings. If *The Catcher* is permeated with Holden's trauma and centered on the unrepresentability of Auschwitz, as Prof. Miura says, the film version of *The English Patient* is laid upon the lack of recognition of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which is included in the novel, as Prof. Torgovnick says. We may also touch upon the multiethnic background of both authors. As Salinger was a son of Jewish and Scotch-Irish parents and Ondaatje, a Canadian, was born in Sri Lanka of Dutch-Tamil-Singhalese descent, their hybrid origin may account for their intricate involvement with the racial issue whether consciously or not. Since Prof. Miura presented minute discussion of *The Catcher*, I would like to deal with the novel *The English Patient*, based on a close reading of the text with due references to Prof. Torgovnick's argument yesterday and in her book *The War Complex*.

While *The Catcher* is non-racial on the surface, *The English Patient* on the contrary is fully racialized in postcolonial idioms, with its extravagant settings in the African deserts and the Villa San Girolamo in wartime Italy, whose characters include a European, an Asian, and two North Americans. A dying Hungarian desert explorer, Almásy, who is mistakenly named the "English patient" is taken care of by a young Canadian nurse Hana in the Tuscan ruin, joined by her family friend Caravaggio and later by a Sikh sapper Kirpal Singh, *aka* Kip who came from the British colonial Punjab [in the northern India], and is working for the British army. Hana and Kip fall in love, as "their continents met in a hill town" (226), and four of them for a while live in transnational harmony until August 1945 when the atomic bombs are dropped in Japan. The assault on the Asian race shocks the Sikh youth who is spurred to shoot Almásy and leave the villa, exclaiming, "American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman" (286). The term "English" here functions as a synecdoche of Euro-American civilization. To set the record straight, the Sikh were abused by Japanese in Malaya (217), and the fact may have been that Almásy took side with the Axis rather than the Allied forces. However, the discourse of race from the side of the repressed minority destroys the utopian community. So Almásy's characterization as accumulation of Western history and knowledge from Greek classics to colonial African deserts seems to play up to the view.

The representation of Almásy on another level, on the other hand, does belie such one-dimensional interpretation. That is, as Prof. Torgovnick rightfully claims, Almásy should be understood "as an emblem and a symbol of all the burned bodies of World War II" (105). Since he bore no identification or no name, Almásy was initially referred to simply as "the burned man" (10) or "the burned patient" (14) before the inaccurate attribute "English" was attached to him. Almásy himself testifies that as he explored widely the African desert in the 1930's, "it was easy for [him] to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation" (139), and that "[a]ll [he] desired was to walk upon such an earth that

had no maps" (261). Nevertheless, he has been named "English" without his consent, and it is not his cosmopolitan sophistication but his being a burned patient in pain that enables him to transgress the West-East dichotomy. The destructive force of the atomic bomb is imagined by Singh in terms of violent burning: "When he closes his eyes he sees fire, people leaping into rivers into reservoirs to avoid flame or heat that within seconds burns everything, whatever they hold, their own skin and hair, even the water they leap into" (286-87). Accordingly, when Singh puts the earphones of his radio, which brought the catastrophic news, on Almásy, it is on "the black head of the patient, who winces at the pain on his scalp" (283-84). Then, the charred body of the man becomes a metaphor of hundreds of thousands who were burnt to death, either on "the streets of Asia full of fire" (284) or in Europe, which would include Hana's father Patrick who also died "*a burned man*" in France (296).

Moreover, while Singh is enmeshed in the discourse of identities, he is at the same time unconsciously compelled to imagine the patient's body as non-racial entity. During his flight over Italy, Singh feels as if he were carrying "the black body of the Englishman," and more significantly, "the black body in an embrace with his" (294). That is, though Singh still calls Almásy the Englishman, to him the burned man ceases to be the epitome of the West, which brought about "[t]he death of a civilization" (286) in the East. Instead, the patient becomes an embraceable war victim, with whom he can share his flight. It is also notable that Singh is haunted by the apocalyptic visions of *The Book of Isaiah*, which Almásy used to sing out to him: "*For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke and the earth shall wax old like a garment. And they that dwell therein shall die in like manner*" (295). Almásy must have been fascinated with the image of ruination with his awareness of mortality through his experiences in the desert. Then, though full of fury against the Western civilization so as to have pointed his rifle at the Englishman, Singh's visitation by the apocalyptic visions seems to betray his apprehension of the futility of the antagonism between the nations and races. The words keep echoing in his head, as if to convey "[a] secret of deserts from Uweinat [in Africa] to Hiroshima" (295). The secret that a gust of hot wind in African deserts carries to the bombed cities in Asia is nothing but the knowledge of death. The words of Judeo-Christian scripture endorse the association of the desolations on different continents via the voice of the burned patient, who is rendered as an encompassing image of the flame-injured victim of the war.

II. Possibility of a Cultural Revolution

The second point of comparison I would like to make concerns a possibility of a cultural revolution in the novel *The English Patient*. Prof. Miura has defined Holden's attempt at revolution as not political but cultural, the rich kid's "Sleight Rebellion." Then, when the Sikh youth succumbs to the paradigm of Hutchinson's clash of identities, it is Hana, who is entrusted with a gesture of

rebellion. Though her disposition is passive and her action so diminutive that we do not witness what change she might bring about to the world, she is rendered as capable of trusting what is common in people beyond her awareness of differences among them. There are several evidences that point to Hana's modest rebellion against the war and the wartime impositions of fixed identities.

If Holden suffers from "uneasiness with America" and strives "to escape from the identity the world imposes on him" (Miura), Hana, who has been distressed by an abortion and grown weary of death-ridden warfare in Europe, declares that "her war is over" (51) and retreats to Villa San Girolamo. She has also cut herself off from femaleness which was foregrounded by the war, as she grew "[s]ick of being treated like gold because [she] was female" (85). Then, beside her yearning for a vicarious father figure, the initial attraction of "the man burned black" (85) to her was his having and demanding no identification: "A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire.... There was nothing to recognize in him" (48). Hana, therefore, has been most keenly aware of the patient's appeal to the common beyond differences and specific identifications. Accordingly, the association of the patient and her father Patrick is clear, as she later writes to her stepmother, "[Patrick] was a burned man and I was a nurse and I could have nursed him" (296). Her attitude toward the patient has effectively underpinned the non-racial representation of the novel.

Hana, at the same time, is not unmindful of the differences. With a touch of naïveté, she recognizes a different civilization through Singh, as "[s]he imagines all of Asia through the gestures of this one man. The way he lazily moves, his quiet civilization" (217). Then, when Hana addresses to Singh after the atomic bombing, "Kip, it's *me*. What did we have to do with it?" (288), her attitude is not so much of non-racial as anti-racial, and it may be easy to dismiss her ineffectuality, as she cannot persuade Singh out of his reverse racism. Also, her lack of social activism seems telling, as she is only vaguely sketched in the epilogue as a solitary thirty-four-year-old woman "of honour and smartness" tending children in Canada (301), or a "nunlike" figure according to Prof. Torgovnick (105). However, if she can still be depicted as "[i]deal and idealistic in that shiny black hair!" (301), we may imagine her yet at her own small rebellion against the dominant culture. With her experience of the war and the relationship with Singh and the burned patient, her attempt must be operated not in the political or social sphere but in the cultural or biopolitical. She has learned of the history of the Sikh, the African deserts, nursing of the burned patient, and the futility of "the feuds of the world" (218). She can be thus qualified as a cultural rebel and biopolitical activist, however slight her attempt may be.

Therefore, I believe Prof. Torgovnick is right to refer to the 2002 speech by the former president Bill Clinton on the U.S. foreign policy after 9/11, in relation to her discussion of Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, the novel which deals with the Asian histories the Western memory has elided as minor (104). In a series of speeches and publications a year after 9/11, Clinton called for a new "American

foreign policy, rooted in a fundamental commitment to move the world from interdependence to an integrated global community committed to peace and prosperity, freedom and security" where "our differences are important, but our common humanity matters more" ("Vision"). He advocated that the U.S. must "build a world with more partners and fewer terrorists" ("Future") by way of "empowerment, opportunity and responsibility" ("Vision") and thus asked for more international cooperations and foreign aid to help improve the education, healthcare, and development of poor nations. Thus, though I do not mean to claim Bill Clinton as any kind of liberal revolutionist, as his foremost concern is the U.S. security after all, his proposal seems to be much in tune with the progressive strategy of biopolitics. Then, we may claim that Hana, tending children who are minorities in a sense to be taken care of, educated, and developed, may be a post-Cold War successor of Holden Caulfield in a cultural rebellion.

Conclusion

I have discussed the racial issue and a possibility of revolution in *The English Patient* in comparison with *The Catcher in the Rye*, to reach a tentative conclusion that Hana, in her sympathy for the minority and in her attempts to hold herself against the identity the world imposes upon her, she may serve as a biopolitical rebel in the post-Cold War period. When placed against pervasiveness of neoliberalism in the globalized world today, however, we cannot oversee the fact that Hana's and Holden's rebellions seem regrettably sleight and ineffectual. Yet, if we think of the term "common" which is this seminar's title, "Toward a Common Memory of Our Past," we may stress its biopolitical dimension and a future-oriented tinge, as Negri and Hardt argued in their discussion of a desired revolution in today's globalized world that "[t]he biopolitical production of the multitude," the plural and multiple people who would bring about democracy for everyone "tends to mobilize what it shares in common and what it produces in common against the imperial power of global capital" (101). Then, we may follow Negri and Hardt's fashion, so that the "common memory" that we discuss today can be understood not as a backward glance at the irretrievable past but as the awareness and recognition of our different experiences with which to build our future upon. Our discussion of and endeavors to move toward a common memory should become a thrust at a more democratic world where people could freely express their differences and commonalities of what they each have created and experienced.

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