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Postcolonial Elements in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

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Abstract:

Postcolonialism is a term refers to the ways in which race, ethnicity, culture, and human identity itself are represented in the modern era. Philip Michael Ondaatje is a well-known anti-colonial contemporary writer and his Golden Man Booker award-winning novel, *The English Patient* reflects the paradigm shift happening in the colonial world after the Second World War by envisaging on the concept of immigrant psychology and identity formation. Identity is built around the changes that war brings into each character's life, and the characters try to reconstruct their identities, influenced by the "world" that surrounds them as well as their own feelings, beliefs, memories, or imaginations. The paper mainly focuses the novel from a postcolonial perspective by exploring the postcolonial elements like polytrophic identity, colonialism, intertextuality, travelling, exploration and space. These multidimensional themes that form the structure and its postcolonial pulse is highlighted in the multicultural unison of the four major characters portrayed in the novel Almasy, Hana, Kirpal Singh and David Caravaggio. These postcolonial elements in *The English Patient* exposes to new areas of concern, that demands immediate attention from the entire people of the contemporary world.

Keywords: Postcolonial, race, ethnicity, polytrophic identity, colonialism, intertextuality, travelling, exploration and space.

"More than three quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism." says the writer of the book *The Empire Writes Back*. These words expose us to the reality of present day existence. In this modern context postcolonial writer, writes to establish their individual identity by their creative tenure which is independent of their colonizer.

Twentieth century has witnessed massive migratory movement of various people across nation and continental boundaries. The reasons of migration vary as the destinations of each

person differ. Yet all immigration experience shares certain fundamental characteristics. Among the numerative creative text around the world Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* remains an outstanding novel in the international literary scenario of migration.

Born in Sri Lanka in 1943, Ondaatje immigrated to England in 1954 and moved to Canada at his age 18. Ondaatje has said of himself, "I am a mongrel of place. Of race. Of cultures. Of many genres." During a career spanning more than 50 years, he has written fiction, poetry, short stories and a memoir. He began his career as a poet but is best known as the author of the novel *The English Patient* (1992). He followed that success with *Anil's Ghost* (2000), *Divisadero* (2007) and *The Cat's Table* (2011).

Among the all other works *The English Patient* won both the Booker Prize and the Governor General's Award. It was adapted into a 1996 film, which received nine Academy Awards and also it won the Golden Man Booker, a special award to crown the best Booker Prize-winning novel on the 50th anniversary of the United Kingdom's most prestigious literary award.

The English Patient is a story of a badly burned man with an enigmatic identity. The story is sensuous, mysterious, and philosophically inspirational with tones of loss and depression during the war, love and history in a place of ruined Italian villa north of Florence at the end of the Second World War. The main characters include a 20-year-old Canadian nurse Hana, who has volunteered to stay behind to care for the nameless burned patient and has grown distrustful of the war and life. The villa is a base for a young Indian sapper Kirpal Singh, a Sikh, nicknamed Kip by his English colleagues in the bomb disposal unit in the Royal Engineers. He defuses bombs in a land ruined by war where everything around him is unsafe, and is challenged by a foreign culture. Hana's old family friend from Canada, David Caravaggio, also arrives to the villa to view Hana. He is a thief with the thumbs cut off, searching for his identity, having to find himself again. The four of them progressively shape a fragile community in the course of the war. The story of the most likely English patient, who will be revealed as Ladislaus de Almásy, a Hungarian Count, tattered through narrated flashbacks of his desert explorations in the Libyan desert, Northern Africa. The tragedy of his injury is connected to his love affair with Katharine Clifton, a young wife of one of his fellow explorers of the British Geographical Society. This fascinating story is entwined by the supreme rhythmic quality, lyrics and narrative impact which are incomparable to any other novel in English.



Ondaatje's *The English Patient* has been referred to as postcolonial fiction in multiple perspectives. *The English Patient* delves into the postcolonial elements such as colonial context, polytropic identity, intertextuality, history and narrative design/structures all shows the burdened postcolonial dilemmas in the psyche of Ondaatje. The important themes rendered in the novel are race, ethnicity, identity, history, nationalism, colonialism, and war. The postcolonial themes and techniques employed in the novel explore the ways in which they develop the themes and questions of the notion of identity crisis which is an aspect of multicultural society. Postcolonial techniques such as narrative discontinuity, mini-narratives, fragmented story-line, decentered and dehumanized subject, the absence of a single truth, multiple identities remains the setting of the novel.

The English Patient evinces many features of postcolonial work, in the colonial context. The novelist coming from third world country with a colonial past, consciously employs the traumatic experiences of history in this novel. The background of the novel is based on the Second World War. The colonial presence in the novel is portrayed from three folded essential postcolonial perspectives. First Ondaatje records the geographical expeditions which were the compulsory elements for consolidating colonial power in North Africa, where the English patient recalls his experiences in the desert. The expeditions were composed of a number of Europeans who had as a common objective as the exploration of the unknown places. Travel is an important aspect when it comes to the conflicting issue of identity that leads to the postcolonial issues. Second the multiethnic aspects of the British Allied Troops remains another trope through which colonial context is realized. And third intertextuality.

A person's characteristics and identity changes according to the environment they live in. Every character in the novel posses the multiple identities depending on the situation and circumstances they live in. These circumstances are competing and even conflicting. In this evolution polytropic identity is another pointer in presenting the postcolonial aspect which factually means "Many ways of being" (75) The novel takes place in a deserted Italian villa and the Sahara desert. Canada, America, England and Asia are represented by fusing the characters from various nations with various identities negotiating their multicultural zones. The characters with their different identities meet in the deserted Italian villa and the story revolves around them. The villa is later converted into a war hospital. The confluence of these four characters Hana, a Canadian born Italian nurse, Caravaggio, a spy and a thief who is Hana father's friend

and her well wisher, a burned English patient - Almasy and Kip, an Indian, a Sikh who is posted at Italy as a member of the bomb diffusal squad and short, ecstatic and thrilling moments they share in the villa propel the story forward in postcolonial perspective by exploring the theme of disillusionment, identity crisis and disbelief after the World War II.

Hence the identity of the English patient is polytropic, he is a character of no character and a part from being a displaced paradoxical traveler and he is also a greater deceiver. His identity is imprinted both in his psyche and his body. "In the Pisa hospital she had seen the English patient for the first time. A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in fire.... .There was nothing to recognize in him."(48) Kip also has a polytropic identity. His condition is characterized by physical displacement as he left his native India, and came to fight for the Allies in the Second World War. He is also characterized by psychological displacement because he is the only hero who never looks back. Hana is the Canadian nurse who landed in Italy. Hana wanted to save the English Patient, "this nameless, almost faceless man." (5) She refuses to identify with herself as she "removed all mirrors and stacked them away in an empty room." (25) Left in an alien territory, she tried to search her true self. She took care of the English patient there but she is not able to nurse her own father who was in Canada. Hana desired to go back to her home "I wanted to go home and there was no one at home. And I was sick of Europe." (90-91) David Caravaggio under a variety of masks, also acquires polytrophic identity. He is an Italian, the traveler, the thief, the double agent, the drunkard, the lover and the friend. Thus identities of the characters are integrated into the apparently barren scenario. Affinities of nature are presented as not only between themselves, but also between themselves and the place. In the novel, the real or the symbolic desert represents the place where the heroes meet each other and define their polytrophic identities in this way English patient, Hana, David Caravaggio and Kip are fragmented, inscribed, described, and interpreted. The characters in the novel become cosmopolitan travelers, taking many as they are polytrophic, evading material borders and always exploring both mental and physical territories.

Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory* makes the point that gives the significance of intertextuality as:

All literary texts are woven at of other literary texts, not in the conventional sense that they bear the traces of 'influence' but in the more radical sense that every



word, phrase or segment is a reworking of other writings which precede or surround the original work. (138)

They all try to reconstruct single identities that cannot exist, but instead achieve some mental stability that allows them to eventually leave the villa at the end. However, the many places of the war, the villa, the library, and the desert, are only temporary escapes. All four of the characters plan to leave at the end of the novel: Kip returns to India and becomes a doctor, Hana plans to return to Canada to her stepmother, Caravaggio also returns to Canada, assumedly with Hana, and the English patient eventually dies. Even though they attempt to escape the connotations and experiences of the places in which they have lived or are living, they cannot. Ondaatje has revealed in an interview that

one of the things that [he] discovered in the book was that [he] thought that this was an Eden, an escape, a little cul-de-sac during the war, and this was where healing began. Then, with the news of other bombs, suddenly this became, perhaps, the last Eden. (Wachtel 252)

The English Patient is significant for the number and scope of its intertexts as Herodotus *Histories*, Stendhal's *The Charter House of Parma* and Kipling's *Kim*. The discernible presence of three books heightens the significance of the different contours of the novel. The most quoted book is *Herodotus* which deals with Egyptian legends explores the framework for the desert exploration of Almasy. Almasy enriches with personal notes drawing maps, which represent his own footprints and geography. *The Charter House of Parma* deals with Napoleon's invasion of Italy. *Kim* is the best example of colonial literature. *Histories* deal with the expeditions in North Africa, the charter house with Tuscan landscape in which the deserted villa is situated. *Kim* is the parody of Kip's life. This intertextual relationship assumes significant roles at the end of the story. *Kim* is the story of a British boy who immerses in Indian culture whereas Kip is an Indian who engulfs in British culture. Kip's attitude changes towards Asia in the end after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The sapper's manual that helps Kip to defuse bombs serve as an intertextual reading. The paintings by Michael Angelo in the Sistine chapel where Kip finds out the face of Isaiah, the gardens, trees and fountains on the walls of the villa, the rustic statue of Virgin Mary are some more intertextual readings in the novel:

Almasy, the English patient, acts as an intertextual writer, who receives and reconstructs texts according to his own sense of himself and the world. Second,

the books with missing pages have gaps of plots, missing incidents like landscape ravaged by storms and bombs. Third, they provide tales and situations parallel to the occurrences of the novel. Fourth, they represent the discontinuous writing in differing modes like the novel itself.(Behera 8)

History is entangled with life and Ondaatje's historical sense involves perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its present. In fact, being a self-conscious postmodern writer with a postcolonial and a new historic outlook, Ondaatje challenge the making of fiction and history. *The English Patient* explores the effects of World War II on a group of four shell-shocked characters revealing their ethnic and national extractions. War encapsulates the irony of history and has a repetitive nature: "The last medieval war was fought in Italy in 1943 and 1944. Fortress towns on great promontories which had been battled over since the eighth century had the armies of new kings flung carelessly against them." (69) At the end of the novel, Kirpal Singh, enraged by the fall of the atomic bomb, identifies the irreversible damage that injures an entire world, anticipating both its falling apart and the beginning of a new world order. He loses his faith in a world organized by the English system of values searching to redefine the landmarks he desires to follow:

He feels all the winds of the world have been sucked into Asia. He steps away from the many small bombs of his career towards a bomb of the size, it seems of a city, so vast it lets the living witness the death of the population around them. He knows nothing about the weapon. Whether it was a sudden assault of metal and explosion or if boiling air scoured itself towards and through anything human. All he knows is, he feels he can no longer let anything approach him. (287)

The four damaged victims in the war comes out of the situation only sharing their experience of past. By exchanging the stories of each other's lives they reshape their identities and collapse the barriers of space and time. Fragmented memories attempt to supplement the past with the present and the present with past. A frequent shift in the narrative pattern gives the new paradigmatic shift of storytelling. Ondaatje narrative keeps moving forward and backwards discontinuously where describing Hana's playing of a piano piece in the villa and the sudden appearance of the two sappers, the narrator suddenly flashes backward to Hana's memory of "the chalk notes that her mother hood drawn on to the kitchen table and then wiped of later."(63)



Thus the character in the novel also reveals the metaphorical space that also seems to lack borders as it has undergone a process of deterritorialization.

The novel offers a postcolonial reading of colonial encounters that puts emphasis on the mutual transformation of colonizer and colonized. The postcolonial elements in the novel remain an integral part, where they are knit together to have a thematic unity. Postcolonial elements in the novel erase edges separating rationality from the unconscious, history from fiction and peace from violence. *The English Patient* exposes to new areas of concern that also demands immediate attention from all people of the contemporary world. The final destruction and devastation of the outside world matches with the inner desolation and tragedies of the character and this shows Ondaatje's motive in raising critical question that aches for answer. Ondaatje's innovative art captures the contemporary human dilemmas in the novel reveals his conscious effort to construct a better future. Through postcolonial elements Ondaatje demands for better understanding of the new world, where it presses the need for reconstruction of the present world rather than deconstruction of discourses, art and memory.

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