



## POSTMODERN CANADIAN FICTION: ONDAATJE'S *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

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*The English Patient* is a work of historical fiction set in the hills of Tuscany against the backdrop of the World War II. The factual and the imaginary intersperse into a tale of tragedy and passion. Structurally, the novel resists, chronological order, alternating between present action in the Italian villa and the flashbacks to memories of a mysterious desert romance that is gradually revealed. Rather than offer a narrator telling a straightforward story. Ondaatje turns the romance into an unlikely mystery, revealing hidden facts of character and identity as the novel progress.

*The English Patient* is the narrative of four characters brought together relentlessly by the circumstances of the World War II. They are Almsy, the "English" patient who is burnt so badly in a plane fire that his face is barely recognizable as a human face. Hana, twenty year old woman who clings to the English, caring for him loyally and tenaciously; Caravaggio, a thief and a friend of Hana's father who lost his thumbs during the war, and Ranjit Kirpal Singh, popularly known as "Kip" who has been trained as a mime-diffusion expert in England and serves in the British Army. Ondaatje depicts his experience as a settler in Canada and the concept of the "Other" in the character of Kip. Not only this, but in representations of Kip, indicates its preference for occupying unidirectional perception and the restrictions on narrative form. The novel also exhibits an ideological contradiction raising necessary questions about the implications of postmodern and postcolonial strategies of writing and concerns.

Ondaatje seems to experiment with the very form of the novel, which ushers him close to postmodernist position. Three of the strategies, which will be analyzed here, are (a) the notion of intertextuality, (b) the radical instability of language and self-consciousness

about the uncertain relationship between "language and reality" and (c) the reader as writer of the narrative.

Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory* explicates on the notion of "intertextuality" thus "All literary texts are woven out of other literary texts, not in the conventional sense that they bear the traces of 'influences' 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)

The idea of intertextuality in the novel as conveyed by the author is that interaction between texts is the precondition for the very existence of a text. The English patient falls in love with Katherine as she reads the story of Gyges and Candaloules from Herodotus' *Histories*. It is the book of Herodotus itself a history in which Almasy records not only his travels and explorations, but, his thoughts about the affair with Katherine. Ondaatje writes, "Almasy's only connection to the world of cities was Herodotus" (246). It was his habit to glue pieces of paper into the book over what he thought were lies and write in a map or sketch of what appears to him the truth. The Herodotus book, the, becomes not only an ancient history, but a more recent history as well. It details Almasy's own observations, his affair with the desert. History in the novel is not a static concept, but a flowing, changing force that connects the past to the present.

The Herodotus' book highlights the possibility of multiple realities existing simultaneously. One reality is no more real than another is; rather, what is essential is the audience's choice of which reality to rely on and accept. Writing over the world of Herodotus, Almasy is literally rewriting history, choosing his perception of reality over that of his historian predecessor. In the same way, the audience must choose a reality when hearing or reading the story. Almasy is also Odysseus, eternal voyager – literary myth intertwines with the presence of historical facts, which is the "reality" of the *Histories*. The novel also intertextually connects with *Kim*, *Rebecca*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Anna Karenina* and many others.

The idea of fictionality of history is foregrounded as the English patient quoting Herodotus says, "this history of mine..... has from beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument" (119). This postmodernist approach to history also has postcolonial element. The images of light and dark, rather than seen from the angle of western literary tradition can also be viewed from the social angle. Kip's sudden change of perspective displaces what Irvine has observed in his essay "the white man's burden by illustrating imperialism malevolence towards coloured skin" (Irvine 143).

Ondaatje's shift towards postmodern disruptions of narrative structures is indicated by increasing reliance on the reader as writer of the text. In the novel, there is no single narrator, as each of the main characters has a voice at one time or another. The point of view shifts from one character to another, sometimes within the same chapter, offering descriptions of a single event from multiple perspectives.

Dramatization of the shift encouraged come through in the part played by Hana, Katherina and Almasy, as writers, recording private associations, feelings and impressions into books thought of as complete, such as the *Histories* or *The Last of the Mohicans*. There is no absolute writer, who has had the last word in the book or about its meaning: "And in his commonplace book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus' *Histories*, are other fragments maps, diary, entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books" (96).

Ondaatje's technique makes clear – as Sudha Rai pointed out in her essay – that it is not his intention to give complete knowledge or certainties of fact and experience like the gaps in the stories Hana is reading out to the English patient, the accidental, natural, or deliberate blanking out of memory for the English patient, the novelistic technique thrusts upon the reader, the responsibility of filling in gaps. The gaps are "like sections of a road washed out by storms" (7) which ultimately lead the reader to fill the in-between space.

As an immigrant writer with transcultural connections Ondaatje often rings into play complex connections mainly linking up marginalized, multidimensional characters. The treatment of non-European races in *The English Patient*, especially as seen in the representations of the Indian Kip, largely relies on the "representational" sign, despite its location in a modernist and postmodernist ethos.

Consequently, Kip's character remains imprisoned within the stereotypes and binary oppositions of western styles of perceptions, what Edward Said in *Orientalism* characterizes as an ideology of Orientalism. As we see in case of Hana, for her Kip is not only India, but Asia: "She imagines all of Asia through gestures of this one man. The way he lazily moves, his quite civilization." (217)

The intertextual references in the novel offer a precarious knowledge not only of the past explosions but of the present too. The continuity asserted by history is beyond, lies beyond, the truth of fiction. The reader like the writer becomes archaeologist, seeking the grammar of fragments. Herodotus's *Histories* intertextuality offers a vast range of explosive possibilities in the expression of a postcolonial sensibility. The patient's copy constitutes not only a fantastical and "thick-leaved sea-book of maps and texts" (97-98) but also with the English patient's own margined insertions and additions, a commonplace book. Where the

"sea-book" may depict a linear, monolithic history, the commonplace book unbolts an explosive text and fiction mark not simply intertextuality but what Simpson phrased as "a hybrid discourse". This reinforces Homi Bhabha assertion that "Hybridity is preplexity of the living as it interrupts the representation of the fullness of life" (314).

Almasy presents/depicts his past life through the kaleidoscopic memory. Hana reads out several pages of Herodotus's *Histories* and *Kim*, Almasy connects his personal experiences with these texts. Rufus Cook observed in his essay: "Salman Rushdie categorised such novels as "novel of memory" in *Imaginary Homelands* which depicts human experiences as inherently "fractured" and discontinuous. *The English Patient* is filled with references to fragments or gaps or shards to fractions or remnants to characters that have been disassembled or reassembled.

To sum up, Ondaatje's *The English Patient* appropriately exemplifies Robert Kroetch's proposition "the fiction makes us real". While not concentrating on the facts, Ondaatje allows his characters to emerge according to their way of storytelling. However, there are several gaps in the story but it is technique, which ultimately bridges the gaps and provides a fine coherence to the tale. Almasy is the center of the story but Ondaatje also concentrates on the periphery of the circle in which he presents the problem of an immigrant not only in Canada but also anywhere in the world. Ondaatje touched upon post colonialism an important area of study with the help of Kip's character – an epitome of post colonialism. Thus, Ondaatje presents both postmodern and postcolonial concerns of writing in his masterpiece *The English Patient*.

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