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Postmodern Traits in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*



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Abstract

Postmodernism is one of the most controversial and influential intellectual movements to appear in the last fifty years. Like modernist literature, postmodern literature is part of socio-cultural and historical development and can be seen as a specific way of a depiction of the postmodern life and culture. It shows a crisis of identity of human being (ethnic, sexual, social and cultural) and its struggle for legitimization in a hypocritical society. More importantly, postmodernism looks upon the “modern” world with increased cynicism and disappointment. Key themes in postmodern thought include irony, arbitrary actions, intertexture, surface and superficiality, self-consciousness, skepticism, multiple perspectives, meta-fiction, fragmentation and relativism.

Michael Ondaatje, the celebrated Canadian poet and novelist of Sri Lankan descent, writes works that ‘talk’ from transnational/trans-cultural locations. *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje is a work of historical fiction set in the hills of Tuscany during the Second World War. The paper discusses how Ondaatje frames the stories around actual historical events, yet

at the same time, his aim is to uncover the unwritten, hidden, ignored histories of the marginal characters. Ondaatje adds to the discourse as he challenges and revises the already narrated one to incorporate the other histories. The novel reveals the inner conflicts that the marginal characters experience as they journey through the external incidents of death, discrimination, domination and seclusion. Ondaatje becomes the voice of the ex-centric people attempting to come to terms with their cultural past, to negotiate identity through the complexities of the present and to secure a place for themselves in the cultural memory.

The English Patient will further convey the idea of disseminated identities of different characters through mini-narratives, intertextuality and rapid narrative shifts thus, giving the post-modernist view to the novel.

Keywords

Historiographic Metafiction, Inter-Textuality, Fragmented Identities, Trans-Cultural/Transnational, Postmodernism

Research Paper

Postmodernism is one of the most controversial and influential intellectual movements to appear in the last fifty years. Like modernist literature, postmodern literature is part of socio-cultural and historical development and can be seen as a specific way of a depiction of the postmodern life and culture. It shows a crisis of identity of human being (ethnic, sexual, social and cultural) and its struggle for legitimization in a hypocritical society. More importantly, postmodernism looks upon the “modern” world with increased cynicism and disappointment. Key themes in postmodern thought include irony, arbitrary actions, intertexture, surface and superficiality, self-consciousness, skepticism, multiple perspectives, meta-fiction, fragmentation and relativism.

Fredric Jameson points to a defining sense of postmodernism as “*the disappearance of a sense of history*”. According to Hans Bertens “*Postmodernism unsettles and deconstructs traditional notions about language, about identity, about writing itself and so on*” (2001: 141). Linda Hutcheon defines postmodernism as:

Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and subverts, the very concepts it challenges-be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics or historiography (1988: 3).

Michael Ondaatje, the celebrated Canadian poet and novelist of Sri Lankan descent, writes works that ‘talk’ from transnational/trans-cultural locations. *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje is a work of historical fiction set in the hills of Tuscany during the Second World War. *The English Patient* is a novel that is both seemingly universal in its themes, and local in its setting. Set in a small villa in post-war Italy, the novel develops themes such as love, friendship and healing, themes which may be related to all peoples of the world. Michael Ondaatje presents the decentered and destabilized notions regarding the subjectivity and textuality in his masterpiece *The English Patient*. The characters and the structure of *The English Patient* present the Postmodernist view of identity.

The English Patient- the protagonist is a nameless person who is burned beyond recognition. The identity of the patient is never disclosed throughout the novel. The people who treat the patient fix his identity. This state reveals the true color of postmodernism. The kind hearted Hana refuses to leave her “patient” in spite of the hospital being shifted to Pisa. Carrivagio, hears about Hana’s stay in the villa and becomes a resident. Kip, the young Indian sapper arrives to the villa in search of mines and continues his stay to render his service in the

surrounding areas of the villa. The concept of fragmentation begins with the crises of identity. The concept of identity, in particular, focused through the lens of postmodernism promises the fact of freedom and the joy of writing. The conventional methodology of presenting idea is broken down. The problem of identity stands as the root cause of “fragmented humanity”.

In *The English Patient*; story telling is the most important feature of its characters. They tell each other of their individual past, and hence form a small community of war-wounded people, where they shed their earlier prejudice and develop a sense of communal self-awareness: In the case of *The English Patient*, it seems that he is alive only to tell his story to his audience. He tells his audience the most important stories of his life e.g. his relationship with Katharine, Katharine’s death and how he discovered the oasis of Zerzura etc. In this concern, we have the first mini-narrative in the following lines “*I have spent weeks in the desert, forgetting to look at the moon...*” (Ondaatje 1992:4). We observe the second mini-narrative about *The English Patient* in the following lines, “*They wrapped the mask of herbs from his face...*” (ibid: 8). Thirdly, we have another mini-narrative when we see *The English Patient* describing about his treatment at the hands of the desert tribes. In the following lines, “*The tribe that had saved the burned pilot...*” (ibid: 101). Another mini narrative that we have in the text is when *The English Patient* describes about his first meeting with the woman of his life Katharine. It starts in the following words, “*when I met Katharine she was married...*” (ibid: 243). We have yet another mini-narrative by *The English Patient* in the following words “*on the floor of cave of swimmers...*” (ibid: 263).

Another example of these mini-narratives by *The English Patient* is when he shifts to his past once again as in the following lines “*I think you have become inhuman...*” (ibid: 252). The fragmented and disseminated narratives of *The English Patient* thus become a text that can be read and re-read, a construct that may be re-arranged and utilized to gain any desired effect. If we arrange the fragments of his story, we may find his character development in the following pattern: He is a famous desert explorer of Africa, the Hungarian Count Ladislaus De Almasy. During his adventure in Africa, he meets Katharine, who is there with her husband Geoffrey to a desert expedition. Almasy and Katharine fall in love. Geoffrey comes to know about this relationship due to which Katharine breaks with Almasy. But she is unable to suppress her emotion. Geoffrey decides to finish the story by killing all three of them in a plane crash in the desert. He does not succeed because he is the only one who dies. Almasy survives and Katharine receives severe injuries, which later on cause her death. Almasy goes to get rescue for her but manages to return three years later. During these three years, he

works as a German spy-leader in the desert. He comes back in a plane but while he is on his way back the plane explodes. Almasy burns and falls down. He is fortunately found by a group of Bedouins who carry him to the British base from where he is taken to nunnery hospital of Florence Italy where he meets Hana who decides to stay in the Villa San Girolamo after the hospital shifts to the Pisa. It is also in this Villa that The English Patient meets Caravaggio and Kip.

Not only Almasy but also other characters of the novel develop themselves through these mini-narratives. In this regard, we have an example of David Caravaggio. There is no logical order of character development in his case. It is again all up to the reader to read and re-read it and hence come to a definite conclusion about him. The sequence of age i.e. childhood, boyhood, adolescence, youth, and the old age is missing to a large extent in his character development. In his first mini-narrative, we see him lost in his memories of the time that he spent with Hana in her childhood. This mini-narrative starts with the following words, *“Accompanying a girl and her father to have her tonsils out...”* (ibid: 310). The second mini-narrative takes the reader into Tuxedo where Caravaggio spent part of his life as in the following words, *“I was in Tuxedo.....”* (ibid: 37) The third mini-narrative appears at the stage in near ruins as *“It was someone’s birthday party”* (ibid: 56). Another mini-narrative appears at the time when Caravaggio describes about his punishment at the hands of German army when he was caught by them and deprived of his thumbs as in the following lines *“They had handcuffed him to the thick legs of an oak tree”* (ibid: 62)

Hana’s character is no exception in this regard. Her character also develops through these mini-narratives. In her character development, we are told firstly about the time when she was an army nurse and had her first chance of coming close to the dead and injured army officers. She describes in her first mini-narrative about the agony of that time as in the following words, *“Half a year earlier...”* (ibid: 43). Then in the second of his mini-narratives, she describes about the very first few days that she spent with The English Patient as in the following lines, *“After the first nights...”* (ibid: 49). The reader does not find the right order of description in the novel as the third mini-narrative by Hana takes her into her childhood period as in the following lines *“In her childhood her classroom had been....”* (ibid: 51). In the next mini-narrative, we see him as a pregnant girl who is ready for abortion as in the lines *“I was almost going to have a baby a year ago”* (ibid: 87). The missing of the logical order of her character development is a symbol of postmodern tendency. Hence, we can gather the idea of no totality and unity of text structure in the novel. With the help of

mini-narratives, the characters of the novel create their own-selves. They work as an author creating a text; they arrange and re-arrange the most important episodes of their lives through these mini-narratives. Postmodern identity is fragmentary which is constructed through the combination of different mini-texts.

Intertextuality is linked with the idea of the boundary between history and fiction, and the challenge to history's claim to provide access to an objective truth. The crux of intertextuality is that it is in confrontation with the view that author is the sole source of the meanings of the text. *The English Patient* is significant for the number and scope of its intertexts, which have a wide range of the works that supply an overarching structure of the novel to those which provide a more local elucidation of theme. Herodotus *Histories*, Stendhal's *The Charter House of Parma* and Kipling's *Kim* are some of the intertexts found in the novel. Herodotus deals with Egyptian legends but it is a great means of understanding and getting to know the desert. 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. The phonic similarities of Kip and Kim whose childhood and adolescent life is spent in India. Kim is loyal to the Lama and is contrasted with Kip's loyalty to Lord Suffolk. But Kip's attitude changes towards Asia in the end after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The sapper's manual which 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 replete with the incidents that modulate our lives and channelize our deeds and actions accordingly. Through history, we learn about cultures, civilizations that enrich and

teach us morality and ethics, and help in forming specific principles of society. *The English Patient* explores the effects of World War II on a group of four shell-shocked characters. In the backdrop, the encounters of people from various ethnic and national extractions are revealed. W. Shaffer succinctly observes, Ondaatje's novels concentrate "...on individuals finding, joining and maintaining communities. With individuals or romantic couples in the foreground, these novels investigate formation, legitimization and evolution of communities in the narrative background, and do so across significant geographical landscapes"

(W.Shaffer, 2011, p.1274). The focus thus is on the 'becoming' of a community, a nation. Though there is no single narrator, the story is alternatively seen from the point of view of each of the main characters. Ondaatje in his novels repeatedly chooses characters from history and legends along with persons with undocumented lives, existences cloaked in ambiguity.

Ondaatje's technique of putting epigraphs to his works enables his readers to unravel the hidden links to the multi-layered, multi-voiced tales. *The English Patient* opens with an epigraph taken from the minutes of the Geographical Society meeting in London of the early nineteen-forties. It reads: "Most of you, I am sure, remember the tragic circumstances of the death of Geoffrey Clifton at Gilf Kebir, followed later by the disappearance of his wife, Katherine Clifton, which took place during the 1939 desert expedition in search of Zerzura". The characters in the novel spend the last days of the war in the Villa San Girolamo in Tuscany, Italy. The setting is where the Canadian nurse Hana, after having refused to join the troops leaving the villa, nurses the badly burned English patient. They are soon joined by Kirpal Singh, who is called Kip. Kip works as a sapper for British troops, his main task being the defusing of bombs. Hana and Kip falls in love. Caravaggio, the other character joins them in the Villa. He worked for British Intelligence in North Africa but lost his thumbs in violent interrogation by the German army. Ondaatje's focus is on the uncertainty of the patient's identity, his Englishness coupled with his non-white appearance and his exotic encounters in the desert contribute to a sense of dislocation and a questioning of the traditional concepts of nation, identity, and race. The mysterious Identity of the patient raises the issues of questioning the national identity. The author himself states in the Acknowledgements that "While some of the characters who appear in this book are based on historical figures...it is important to stress that this story is a fiction and that the portraits of the characters who appear in it are fictional, as are some of the events and journeys" (322). Furthermore, the

novel deals with the way history is written and shows through its fragmented style of narration the various ways history is recorded and events are universalized.

Ondaatje exposes the true adventurous spirit of explorers like Almásy whose sole aim is to render a unique contribution to the society by sharing his experiences of exploration with the people around him. He regards power and finance as temporary and futile elements of life as he believes that the passage of time will evanesce the claims of having been the first eyes to discover the land and superannuate the boasting that they are the strongest army and the cleverest merchants of the world. Ondaatje quotes Herodotus whose words were — *‘For those cities that were great in earlier times must have now become small, and those that were great in my time were small in the time before. . . . Man’s good fortune never abides in the same place’* (151).

Almásy and his companions leave the safe domains of their home in search of adventure. They are ready to face the primitive challenges of the desert. They have the ability to recognise any part of the town by glimpsing the skeleton of its map. Almásy considers the desert as a safe haven for people as it evades the markers of race and ethnicity. He and his colleagues compose their experiences in books exposing the tremendous glory of the deserts of Africa so as to offer a point of reference for the future explorers who undertake expeditions to the deserts. They are selfless and dedicated in their pursuit of knowledge but their expertise becomes one of the instruments of the Empire.

Ondaatje avouches lie and ownership as the two vices of war. He represents the pure scientific aspect of exploration through Madox who commits suicide when he finds it difficult to tolerate the cruel realities of war, —Someone’s war was slashing apart his delicate tapestry of companions (256). The explorers sacrifice their life for the sake of expedition but their contribution is considered trivial. Instead, the colonizers encourage the contributions of the members of the expedition who betray the sanctity of the desert.

The Second World War has littered the entire country with dead, half-eaten animals and with the rotten bodies of people hanging upside from the bridges. Ondaatje exposes the horrors of the war on the European countries by presenting the damaged condition of Italy within the larger context of Europe in ruins. In this scenario of chaos, the villa located outside Florence remains besieged for a month as it has been regarded as the main target during the onslaught of war. Entire town is torn apart by fire shells and most parts of the villa’s top storey are crumbled under explosions.

Ondaatje expresses that in the postmodern world of war, the city is also considered unsafe for people to live. The delayed action bombs are mined into the walls of public buildings and nearly every vehicle that crossed the road has been rigged. The retreating German army has left pencil mines within the musical instruments with an intention that the returning owners who open up the piano would face the danger of losing their hands. The Germans have retaliated by killing ten Italians for every German killed. The bombs are attached to taps, to the spines of books and into the fruit trees. The harbour scuttled ships are freshly mined and a German who witnesses the horrific state of the world, confesses that —there were thousands of bombs hidden in the harbour section of the city that were wired to the dormant electrical system (294).

The sappers like Kirpal Singh become suspicious of any normal object placed in the room. They find it impossible to trust anything as concrete at the time of war since there is no permanence to the existence of things around them. The corpses too are considered to be very dangerous as they are sometimes mined and are blown up in the mid air. Ondaatje apprehends that with the end of war, life becomes plainly absurd. The sappers are not permitted to go home even after the end of war as they are entrusted with the task of diffusing the bombs mined by the Germans. Ondaatje presents the post world war society as:

. . . a Heroic Age of bomb disposal, a period of individual prowess, when urgency and a lack of knowledge and equipment led to the taking of fantastic risks. . . It was, however, a Heroic Age whose protagonists remained obscure, since their actions were kept from the public for reasons of security. It was obviously undesirable to publish reports that might help the enemy to estimate the ability to deal with weapons.’ (196)

Sudha Rai in the article entitled —Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*: Ideology and Form examines how Ondaatje’s novels are placed against — “the backdrop of war are wounds, burns and scarring memories, as permanent in their residues as the mutilation of limbs and the agonized deaths of victims of the war” (158).

The new environment threatens not only the physical health but also the mental stability of the immigrants. The cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior race or culture jeopardizes their sense of self. Ondaatje posits that while some of the expatriates manage to abandon the feelings of depression and continue with their lives, others succumb to them as they find it difficult to overcome and control the conflicting forces of the society. The expatriates who surrender often face destruction or even death as they do not cope with the changes of life.

They construe the sane world as a life-threatening force, which tends to isolate them even further and destroy their reality and hence they seek refuge in silence.

Hana's relationship with Kirpal Singh, the Sikh Sapper from India also known as Kip gives her a sense of security and sanity. She begins to spend the evening hours with him and their intimacy develops gradually. It is this bonding between them that helps her in gaining the vitality to face life cheerfully. Glen Lowry in his article on — Between the English patients: "Race and the Cultural Politics of Adapting Can Lit" observes that — "Singh's arrival at the villa and his ensuing relationship with Hana are crucial to her attempt to heal herself from the devastation of the war and to come to terms with her grief over the death of her stepfather, Patrick" (224).

This sense of security and support deteriorates with Kip's decision to leave Italy after the bombing of Hiroshima. She comprehends the uncertain state of her existence after Kip's departure. She feels displaced and reckons that —the trouble with all of us is we are where we shouldn't be. What are we doing in Africa, in Italy? . . . We should all move out together (129). Hana's decision to move from Italy symbolises her realisation that it is impossible to lead an isolated life in war torn areas. She feels that in her homeland, she will be able to remain herself. So, she decides to return to Canada, a place to which she belongs, where she will be received without prejudice or violence and a place she has once called home.

Ondaatje ascertains that home offers the — "emotionally disturbed handmaidens of the war" (190) to reconstruct a future as opposed to the limbo of the villa at the end of Second World War. Identity of an individual remains at stake even after the end of war, so one has to escape from that arena to start life anew. Hana's realisation enables her to restore her identity whereas her patient known by the names such as Count Ladislaus de Almásy, Cicero and the English patient, fails in achieving a stable identity.

Ondaatje foregrounds the existential crisis of the postmodern world that degenerate the composite identity of the individuals. He conjoins the fragmented identity of Almásy and Caravaggio with that of their fragmented body parts. In the article entitled — "Multi-Ethnic Polytopic Identity in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*" John Richard asserts that the — "fragmented nature of consciousness is a method of dealing with the feeling of disintegration of the post-war and the post-colonial period" (172). The incapacitated body of the individuals endorses their destabilised self. Caravaggio who has acted as a spy for the Allies during the war shares the predicament of Almásy as he has also been tattered physically and psychologically by the abominable events of war.

Caravaggio was born in Italy but he has stayed in Canada for most of the years of his life. He is a postmodern traveller, who has chosen to remain nomadic in the world. He has been a professional thief before the war. He has worked with intelligence departments in Cairo and Italy. Caravaggio has suddenly become an important commodity, a source of unique skills, which seem vital to the war-effort. The thieves are legitimised because they have the ability to read through the camouflage of deceit more naturally than official intelligence. Almsy is a Hungarian and Kirpal Singh nick named as Kip is the Punjabi Indian who is fond of western culture.

Identity is a post modern construct: the ways an individual understands what it is to belong to a certain gender, race or culture. Identity is initially constructed by the discourses operating in society which naturalises certain ways of knowing what it is to belong to this social group. In *The English Patient* Ondaatje's writing in the 1990's about the Second World War questions the very notions of identity, showing how the dominant discourse of Western imperialism and civilisation have dispossessed those people of different races and cultural identities. (Anghel 75)

As an expatriate writer, the author brings out transnational identities and cross-cultural meetings across the barriers. Confluence of multicultures like Indian, British and Canadian is one of the aspects dealt in the novel. Two Canadians in the villa Hana and Caravaggio, the Greek Almsy and the Indian Kip meet and form a relationship. In the personal recounts of the four occupants of the villa, Ondaatje ingeniously asserts the notion that all people are creatures of the past and try to define future events accordingly by incorporating a variety of nationalities into the novel. Hana and Caravaggio are Canadians, Kip is an Indian, and the English patient is a Hungarian.

Ondaatje has outlined a number of important themes as the most important in the novel, such as race, ethnicity, identity, history, nationalism, colonialism and war. The postmodern and postcolonial themes and techniques employed in the novel explore the ways in which they expound the themes and questions of the notion of identity crisis, which is an aspect of multicultural society. Postmodern techniques such as narrative discontinuity, mini-narratives, fragmented story-line, decentered and dehumanized subject, the absence of a single truth, multiple identities form a backdrop in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*.

Multiculturalism is one of the postmodern tools used in the novel. The characters from different cultural backgrounds join together in the villa and reconstruct their identity. The

issue of identity is of primary importance in the cosmopolitan contemporary world characterized by blending of cultures and globalization.

The novel contains symbolism in its larger historical frame of reference. Histories suggest connection between Second World War and the war between Greeks and Persians. The graphic works present in the story serve as murals in which the characters understand themselves and their relationship.

The novel is full of technical details drawn from non-literary texts projecting a war time atmosphere. It is replete with desert winds, dust storms, and methods of archaeology, cartography and bomb defusing techniques. The villa was a nunnery before the Germans conquered, presents religious contexts. Hana who has lost her father in the war finds the English patient to be a father figure. These literary and non-literary texts form the sub texts to the novel. History and fiction, archaeology and myth are combined to form a kind of metafiction. A text becomes polyphonic with mixture of voices within and outside the texts. They are dialogically and intertextually arranged and the novel approximates what Almassy calls “We are communal histories, communal books” (261).

Thus, in the postmodern world, the large scale displacement of people as a result of colonisation and globalisation has aroused new concerns over identities. The mundane intercultural interactions with people of different cultures in a multicultural social scenario lead to the identity crisis. The postmodern novels give multiple perspectives on the protagonists’ actions and intentions; and demand the readers to solve the loose ends by filling in the unnarrated events. Canadian postmodernism designates art forms such as literature as fundamentally self-reflexive. The setting of Ondaatje’s novels is not limited to particular geographical terrain. He has dealt with the social life and cultural practices of people living in different parts of the world including New Orleans, Sri Lanka, Italy, Africa, Canada, United States, France and England in his novels. He has captured the moments of social crisis by depicting the horrific events followed by the destructive world wars, civil wars, gulf wars in his novel.

The English Patient projects the background of the post World War period in San Girolamo villa of Italy and suggests the unique bond that is developed among four migrants who are all shell shocked and secluded in a nunnery that is turned into a hospital at the time of war. The war becomes more prominent in the novel as it has brought them together. The novel is filled with various small stories of pains and wounds from the overwhelming invasion of war and the trauma that resulted from it. It reveals and narrates the personal stories that are neglected

by the official history of Western hegemony, emphasising that war has distorted the lives of individuals besides disrupting the social conditions of the world.

The novel offers a mixture of styles, discourse and text types ranging from realistic to the postmodern. Realistic descriptions have their moorings in details of time, place and sequence. The passages are mythical, poetical and symbolic releasing a new significance. The novel combines factual and textual registers with allusions to mythical stories in the *Histories*. The novel has multidimensional themes that form the structure. The tale is sensational and intensely passionate. The novel ends in oppression towards imperialism. Thus, many post modern themes and techniques employed by the author in the novel is a proof of his merit.

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