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HISTORY IN *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

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Abstract: Michael Ondaatje's contribution to the English literature is highly admired and approved by critics. His novel *The English Patient* has bagged for him the most celebrated award, the Booker prize. Ondaatje has confirmed his dexterity by presenting variety of themes and techniques in his works. His creative adroitness revives life in the pages of his novels. To make life-like portrait he creates real situation for his characters. For the purpose he picks some historical incidents and uses them in his narratives. This use of history frequently comes in some of his novels. To create actual setting Ondaatje employs some historical incidents or facts and exercises a technique of blending history in his fictional account. This technique has been abundantly used in his masterpiece *The English Patient*.

Keywords: Ondaatje, history, war, facts, villa.

INTRODUCTION

Philip Michael Ondaatje, author of the Booker prize winning novel *The English Patient* (1992), has emerged as one of the most eminent and versatile Canadian writers. His works have been translated into more than a dozen of languages, amassed numerous awards for him. In Ondaatje's works there is an abundance and variety of themes such as interest in national boundaries and identities, sensitivity to gender relations, the manifold cultural effects of war, and beautification of violence. In addition critics have acclaimed Ondaatje's depiction of historical events, their impact upon the life of his characters. Here history is the keynote and Ondaatje has been applauded by the scholars for his manipulation of the same in his works. His competent use of history in some of his works is a noteworthy impression. *The English Patient* (1992) Ondaatje's best novel establishes the World War II as the background of the novel. It reveals the story of the protagonist and some others through their memories. History exists prevalently in *The English patient* through the historical themes like colonialism and its impact, the imperialism, the World War, nationalism and how it tampers with the lives of his characters all these are handled with precision in the novel.

In this paper Michael Ondaatje's recurrent use of history in *The English Patient* is scrutinized.

In Ondaatje's novels history is the prevalent part. But it does not reveal the history as the historical records. Or it can't be applied a term annals of history. In many his works he attempts to revive history. Ondaatje employs real so brilliantly with imagined that his works become a form that is less conventional in literary history. While manipulating his creative authority, Ondaatje concentrates on actual people that have been the victims of negligence in the pages of history that have been "silenced by either too much documentation... or far too little" (Barbour 7). Ondaatje broadens the limitations of historical tradition and expectation of historical truth by his exercise of collecting and transforming particular bits and remnants of the past in a fragmented and fictional form. In his artistic and dexterous hands these dormant and preserved fragments are retold and revived into the spread of public. In his works Ondaatje incessantly uses the historical incidents to invent the plot. In some of Ondaatje's novels the story takes place as an aftermath of some substantial historical events. His literary creation, *The English Patient* collects and interlinks the fragments of historical facts and entwines them with fiction into prose narrative.

Michael Ondaatje's best novel *The English Patient*, for which he has been honoured with the Booker Prize in 1992, selects the time near the end of World War II. In *The English Patient* the author demonstrates how dreadful the consequences of war upon the human life are. The story reveals the histories of the injured Hungarian English man Almasay, the Canadian nurse Hana, a thief Caravaggio and Kip an Indian soldier of a British Army. Who live in an Italian Villa at the end of World War II.

The action of the novel is set inside and around an Italian Villa in April 1945 during the disordered final phase of the World War II. In this villa four characters live together for different purpose. It is at the Italian hill town where there is other villa, the Villa Medici and a monastery. In the Villa Medici the generals lived but the Villa San Girolamo used to be a convent, a last sign of German Army's power, which had been used by almost a hundred troops for their sojourn. When this building has been taken over by The Allies, they turned it into a hospital. The patient and other nurses left the villa for the safer place but the nurse, Hana, anxious for one particular person, a figure burned beyond recognition, who has forgotten his true identity and assumed the name of the 'English Patient', and thus Hana stays there amidst the clash of arms. In the abandoned villa, though there is no heat or electricity, they manage to survive. The nurse, Hana, Patrick Lewis's adopted daughter from *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), Ondaatje's another novel, now serving as a nurse, makes the villa clean and she confides her safety in the villa, though there is danger of wandering ruffians. The retreating German forces had been making the life of general too dreadful. They had been burning the houses and bridges. The historical devastating War situation is described here and there in the novel: "As the hill town began to be torn apart like a battleship at sea, by fire shells, the troops moved from the barrack tents . . . Sections of the chapel were blown up. Parts of the top storey of the Villa crumbled under explosions." (EP 13-14) The novel also depicts the terrible scene of war outside the villa:

It is still terrible out there. Dead cattle. Horses shot dead, half eaten. People hanging upside down from bridges. The last vices of war. Completely unsafe. The sappers haven't gone there yet to clear it. The Germans retreated burying and installing mines as they went. a terrible place for a hospital. The smell of the dead is the worst. We need a good snowfall to clean up this country. We need ravens. (EP 31)

The third chapter of the novel begins with the description of ravages due to war:

The last mediaeval war was fought in Italy in 1943 and 1944. Fortress towns on great promontories which had been battled over since the eighth century had armies of new kings flung carelessly against them. Around the outcrops of rocks were the traffic of stretchers, butchered vineyards, where, if you dug deep beneath the tank ruts, you found blood-axe and spear. Monterchi, Cortona, Urbino, Arezzo, Sansepolcro, Anghiari. And then the coast.

Cats slept in the gun turrets looking south. English and Americans and Indians and Australians and Canadians advanced north, and the shell traces exploded and dissolved in the air. When the armies assembled at Sansepolcro, a town whose symbol is the crossbow, some soldiers acquired them and fired them silently at night over the walls of the untaken city. Field Marshal Kesselring of the retreating German army seriously considered the pouring of hot oil from battlements. (EP 73)

The concept of history plays a pivotal and momentous role in *The English Patient*. In the novel beside the modern historical war there is a discussion of the western world's history of involvement in the desert:

There is, after Herodotus, little interest by the Western world towards the desert for hundreds of years. From 425 B.C. to the beginning of the century there is an averting of eyes. Silence. The nineteenth century was an age of river seekers. And then in the 1920s there is a sweet postscript history on this pocket of earth, made mostly by privately funded expeditions and followed by modest lectures given at Geographical Society in London at Kensington Gore. (EP 141)

"Ondaatje's fascination with intertextuality also inflects the novel's enquiry into the status and function of historical knowledge" (CWW 181) The book of Herodotus unveils many past stories of the English patient's life. He records his past stories of his explorations in desert, his feelings for Katharine in the pages of *The Histories*. The English patient, who is revealed now as Almasi thinks the Histories to be lies and the maps to be truth. Thus he pastes pieces of paper into the book of Herodotus and writes in maps. Due to this habit of Almasi the Herodotus book becomes not only the history of ancient world but of Almasi's own history by which the readers are made aware of the wartime crises and the past of Almasi as well. Thus the history in the novel is not a motionless process, but a force, constantly changing, that links the past to the present.

In the novel the Herodotus book emphasizes the possibility of multitudinous realities simultaneously existing. Almasi records the geographical and cultural descriptions that reveal the existence of his affair with Katharine. While writing over the Herodotus's words, Almasi actually rewrites history, according to his own perception of reality over his historian predecessor. In the same manner the readers or the audience may choose the reality while reading or listening the story. When this story is listened into fragments by Kip, Hana or Caravaggio they cannot understand Almasi's story. But by linking with their present or their lives, they can understand the hidden history and in this way they can change the history, giving it a new dimension.

When, Caravaggio, another character is introduced, he had been with bandaged hands in the hospital for four months. He does not tell his identity and writes only his serial number that reveals that he is with the Allies. He appears to be a man of status in arms: "His status had been double-checked, and confirmed in messages from London. There was the cluster of known scars on him. So the doctors had come back to him, nodded at the bandages on him. A celebrity, after all, wanting silence. A war hero." (EP 29) He overhears the conversation between doctors and becomes aware of the grim war situation:

It is still terrible out there. Dead cattle. Horses shot dead, half eaten. People hanging upside down from bridges. The last vices of war. Completely unsafe. The sappers haven't gone there yet to clear it. The Germans retreated burying and installing mines as they went. a terrible place for a hospital. The smell of the dead is the worst. We need a good snowfall to clean up this country. We need ravens. (EP 31)

Caravaggio also comes to villa for the sojourn. He meets Hana whom he has known since her childhood. He is attracted romantically towards Hana, but he knows she is interested to serve the burned man. When Hana enquires about him, he answers that he has been sent at a German party to steal some documents by the Allies. Through his persecution Ondaatje makes the readers known to sufferings of war. "Then Ranuccio Tommasoni picked up the razor and came over to him . . . As he lay under the table, the blood from his hands fell into his face . . . Blood everywhere now. His hands already useless." (EP 62) Hana has lovely feelings for Caravaggio, though this relation is not far-reaching.

At the villa, when, Hana plays piano in the library, two soldiers entered into the library. One of them is an Indian officer, a young sikh, who works of removing mines and unexploded bombs for the British forces. This sikh is another important character of the novel, Kip, Kirpal Singh from India. Horrified by the music of the piano he entered into the library, it is his duty to make the area safe and clear for the residents by removing bombs and mines. One day, an explosion is heard by Kip, while they celebrate a party in the villa. He finds Hardy, his second-in-command, dead there in this explosion and he buries the corpus. Hana is attracted towards Kip. They become lovers and the war stress is the base of their love. The historical facts are masterly used to invent love story. Ondaatje explores the nature of love and presents how in the middle of war it can exist.

Anti-nationalism is also apparent here when the patient says: "We were German, English, Hungarian, African- all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations." (EP 147) This concept of nationality and the quality of being "nationless", Ondaatje further attempts to establish through the character of Kip. The attachment to the Englishness of Kip is revealed from his experience with Lord Suffolk and the staff. Though Kip is an Indian born Sikh, he feels closer to Suffolk's English family than to his Indian one. He becomes apathetic towards the fate of his Indian family but he talks sadly about his mentor Lord Suffolk and his untimely demise. When Hana asks about his father's death Kip's reply is more indifferent: "Oh, yes. I think. I've not had letters for some time. And it is likely that my brother is still in jail." (EP 214) He is attached to the west despite of his brother's warning. Kip puts forward his brother's anti-Western outlook: "Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them. But we, oh, we were easily impressed – by speeches and medals you're your ceremonies." (EP 302-303) The news of the United's States' dropping of atomic bomb on Hiroshima shatters Kip. He bewilders and agitates as his belief shatters. "If he closes his eyes he sees the strets of Asia full of Fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadow of humans suddenly in the air. This treamor of Western wisdom." (EP 302) Through his sufferings Ondaatje gives vent to anti-imperial views:

Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. You stood for precise behaviour. I knew if I lifted a teacup to the wrong finger I'd be banished. If I tied the wrong kind of knot in a tie I was out. Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had the histories and printing presses? (EP 301)

At the end the war plays again a momentous role in transforming all the characters' lives. Hearing the news of atomic bomb Kip realizes that his fault i.e. attachment to the West. He tries to atone his guilt by killing the English patient, but he leaves without doing so. In the ends Hana is shown nursing his English patient, whereas Kip is in India, as a Doctor having a wife and two daughters, recalling Hana and her love.

In the novel all the characters come close and transform themselves due to the historical facts. Thus Ondaatje cleverly uses the history of the historical World War II in the pages of *The English Patient* to portray the life of his characters that make the novel a remarkable piece of literature.

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