Chapter 31

Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*

**Introduction**

In this chapter, we are going to read about Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje’s acclaimed novel *The English Patient*, a novel set in Europe during the World War II. Apart from its core concern with interpersonal relations, devastations during the War and postcolonialism, the novel is interested in the title character’s identity. Deep at the heart of *The English Patient* lie the themes of guilt, betrayal and reconciliation.

**Canadian literature and Postcolonialism**

When we talk about contemporary Canadian literature, we enter a discourse in crisis, highlighting shifting political, social and economic imperatives. It is necessary for students who are interested in the areas of English or Canadian literature, to recognize the constructs of identity, of ownership and affiliation, of complicity with the hegemonic institutions of European colonialism and/or North American neo-colonialism.

Amongst post-colonial, feminist and race theorists, the 1980s and 1990s we have observed an increasing concern with the relationship between literature and the larger socio-political contexts in which it develops. During this course, you must have come across names, such as Said (his *Orientalism* is one of the foundational studies of the postcolonial theory), Spivak and Bhabha. These theorists postulate that English culture exists not simply as the expression of elegance and higher culture, but as the reflection of a massive enterprise of hegemonic influence and self-validation for colonizing elites. As you must be aware of, for most former British colonies, postcoloniality begins in the mid- to late twentieth century, when most of the British colonies fought for their independence from the British rule, and became autonomous nations. You must understand that the designation “postcolonial” has been used to describe writing and reading practices grounded in colonial experience occurring outside of Europe but as a result of European expansion and exploitation of “other” worlds.

Postcolonial theory is thus concerned with examining the mechanisms through which the colonizing powers persuaded the colonized to accept a foreign culture as better than their native way of living. And postcolonial theorists focus on the discourses and articulation of voices of the former colonised. You will, or probably already have, come across the term ‘binary’ which means the exact opposite of a term, for example, ‘black’ as opposed to ‘white’ and ‘savage’ as opposed to ‘civilized.’ Edward Said in his *Orientalism*, describes that the West’s construction of the Orient projects all the things that the West considers negative. This means all the things on the right-hand side of the slash in a binary opposition represents the other, or the Orient. Hence, ‘the Orient’ becomes the place where body, and not mind; evil, and not good; ignorance, as opposed to
enlightenment; and the feminine, as opposed to the masculine, reside. By juxtaposing all these ‘negatives; on the Orient, argues Said, the West positions itself as all positive.

Coming back to where we started from, in Canadian literature, as is true of the literature of most former colonies, the idea of “nation” exerts a powerful influence on its writing and reading. In the context of globalisation, the problematic histories and political functions of literary nationalism assumes new meaning and urgency. We can hereby posit that as an ideal, Canadian literature remains a vital site where we can locate discussions of complex socio-political relations.

We know that many works of contemporary literature have repeatedly dealt with the issue of “the outsider”, and the key figures in The English Patient, the protagonist, Count Almasy, Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio, are all—in some ways or other—“others” in a world gone awry. The understanding of the ideas of nation and “the outsider” vis-à-vis the postcolonial theory is important to understand this section. Almasy represents Ondaatje when he 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” (p.138). It is through such linguistic clues, that you should find a key to understand the themes and issues in this novel.

Now let us move on to discuss another literary term, that is, the postmodern. This concept has already been discussed in one of the earlier chapters of these lectures, but it will be of use to revisit it in order to understand The English Patient.

Modernism, to explain further, emphasizes on subjectivity in arts, for instance, you must have come across the stream-of-consciousness writing where the focus is on how seeing takes place, rather than on what is perceived. The modernists also resorted to blurring of distinctions between genres, fragmenting forms, and displayed a tendency towards self-consciousness. Further, modernism rejected elaborate formal aesthetics for minimalist designs and rejected the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ or popular culture.

Postmodernism, like modernism, follows most of the above mentioned tenets, including eliminating boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejecting distinctions of genre, emphasising pastiche, self-reflexivity, parody, bricolage, and irony.

Some major figures of postmodernist writings are Jorge Borges, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Angela Carter. Influential critics of postmodernism are Ihab Hassan, Charles Jencks, Roland Barthes, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale. Literary critics began to use the expression ‘postmodernism’ in the 1960s to distinguish the post-World II experimental fiction of Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, and others from the classics of high modernism. Although critics have become quite shy of using the term it is still used as a useful heuristic for the study of contemporary fiction. As Brian McHale explains,
‘the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological. That is, modernist fiction displays strategies which engage and foreground questions such as… “how can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?” Other typical modernist questions might be added: What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; …What are the limits of the knowable?...the dominant, of postmodernist fiction is ontological…” Which world is this? What is to be done in it?...” Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?...’ (McHale 1987: 9-10).

Apart from the postcolonial and postmodern readings, the novel can also be interpreted as an anti-capitalistic work, critiquing the materialist west. As Caravaggio admonishes Hana, “It’s only the rich who can’t afford to be smart. They’re compromised. They got locked years ago into privilege” (p. 123).

**Assignment**

After a week of the Sikh sapper’s presence around the villa they adapted to his habits of eating. Wherever he was---- on the hill or in the village----he would return around twelve-thirty and join Hana and Caravaggio, pull out the small bundle of blue handkerchief from his shoulder bag and spread it onto the table alongside their meal. His onions and his herbs—which Caravaggio suspected he was taking from the Franciscans’ garden during the time he spent there sweeping the place for mines. He peeled the onions with the same knife he used to strip rubber from a fuzz wire.

The sapper’s nickname is Kip. “Get Kip.” “Here comes Kip.” The name had attached itself to him curiously. In his first bomb disposal report in England some butter had marked his paper, and the officer had exclaimed, “What’s this? Kipper grease?” and laughter surrounded him. He had no idea what a kipper was, but the young Sikh had been thereby translated into a salty English fish (pp 86-87).

**Questions**

_How is the Sikh’s identity marked out from the other inhabitants of the Villa?_

_Comment on the writer’s tone and his attitude towards Kip?_
Life and works of Michael Ondaatje

Michael Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka on September 12, 1943. His parents, Mervyn Ondaatje and Doris Gratiaen, were prominent members among the inhabitants of what once comprised Ceylon's colonial society. His father was a tea and rubber-plantation superintendent who was afflicted with alcoholism. Ondaatje’s mother performed part-time as a radical dancer, inspired by Isadora Duncan. As a result of his father's alcoholism, Ondaatjes parents separated in 1954 and he immigrated with his mother, brother and sister to England in 1952. He followed his brother to Canada in 1962, and attended Bishop’s University in Lennoxville, Quebec. He received his B.A. from the University of Toronto in 1965, and his M.A. from Queen’s University in 1967. He has taught at a variety of institutions, including the University of Western Ontario, York University, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Brown University and the University of Toronto.

Michael Ondaatje is probably best known for his work The English Patient (1992). The novel is a continuation of an earlier Ondaatje novel, In the Skin of a Lion (1987), which first introduces David Caravaggio, the Italian-Canadian thief, and Patrick Lewis, Hana’s stepfather, who dies of burns in The English Patient. Set in Toronto, it captures moments in the lives of a number of immigrants, and dramatizes the construction of Toronto. In its slow and poetic tone, the novel describes the building of one bridge, how it was planned, and the deaths and accidents during its construction.

Ondaatje started his literary career with poetry in 1967 publishing Dainty Monsters. From the title, we can already see how Ondaatje enjoys juxtaposing opposite images, and as a result explores these seemingly incongruent ideas, a trait that links almost all of his works. His serial poem the man with seven toes (1969) was inspired by paintings by an Australian artist, and a true story of a woman living among the Aborigines after a shipwreck. This interest in historical fragments and visual arts has become signatures of Ondaatje's writing. Both the collection of poems The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (1970) and his first novel Coming Through Slaughter (1976) were inspired by pictures, historical fragments as well as oral legends, many of which are included in the final published works. Ondaatje calls In the Skin of a Lion (1987) his first novel, and it takes place in Toronto within the Macedonian immigrant community. Again, he relies heavily on historical documentation for inspiration, weaving it into a fictional story. As you have read above, two characters from this novel turn up again in The English Patient, another story based on historical archives. In 1982, he published Running in the Family, a fictional biography of his childhood in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Instead of relying on archival history, Ondaatje instead uses the oral history of his family to try and reconstruct his father’s tumultuous past.

Ondaatje’s next major work was Anil’s Ghost (2000) which is set amidst the civil war in Sri Lanka during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Ondaatje observes that the conflict in the island has three sides: the government, the antigovernment insurgents and the separatist guerrillas. Against the backdrop of this ethnic and political strife, Ondaatje’s
novel takes a startlingly anti-violent stand via the character of Anil Tissera, a forensic pathologist, who works for a human rights organisation within the United Nations.

Divisadero (2007) maps the lives of three characters through their journeys across California of the 1970s, San Francisco of the 1990s, and the present day France.

In 1992 he won the Booker McConnell Prize for his novel The English Patient. He has won the Governor-General’s Award four times, the Giller Prize and the Prix Medicis. He was named to the Order of Canada in 1988. He was awarded the Ralph Gustafson Award, 1965; the Epstein Award, 1966; and the President's Medal from the University of Ontario in 1967. Also in 1980 he was awarded the Canada-Australia prize.

The English Patient: An Introduction

The English Patient is the most famous work by Ondaatje. The writer’s sense of poetry is apparent in the lyrical style of the work, and as already seen above, the novel’s principal themes are continuation of themes that appeared in two of his earlier works: The Dainty Monsters (1967) and The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems (1970). Like the earlier works by Ondaatje, The English Patient explores love, memory, exile, the conflicted sense of national identity, the pitfalls of complicity with the ruling elite, the intensity of sexual passion, the postmodernist sense of history as a narrative, the conflict between creative and destructive energy, and how does the “other” manifest itself. Stylistic conventions that emerge in The English Patient appeared first in Ondaatje’s poetry, that is, gaps and fragmentation, non-linear and circular narrative, interruptions of and intrusions on the story, shifting points of view, and conflation of different genres.

The English Patient was the recipient of the Booker Prize and the Governor General’s Award in 1992. Subsequently, there have been volumes of books and articles on Ondaatje, most of which have done a positive assessment of his works.

The film

The film The English Patient (1996), was directed by Anthony Minghella and starred actors, such as Ralph Fiennes, Kristin Scott Thomas, Juliet Binoche, Willem Defoe, Naveen Andrews and Colin Firth. The film won nine Academy Awards, including Best Picture of 1996.

For more details, you can visit:

http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/english_patient/
QUIZ

Answer the following in brief:

i. What are the recurring themes in Ondaatje’s works?
ii. Mention any two main features of postcolonial literature.
iii. What are the basic differences between modernist and postmodernist fiction according to Brian McHale?

Suggested readings


Suggested links

- [http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/anglophone/postcolonial.html](http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/anglophone/postcolonial.html)
- [http://faculty.pittstate.edu/~knichols/colonial2.html#terms](http://faculty.pittstate.edu/~knichols/colonial2.html#terms)