The Zeitgeist of the Second World War Society in Michael Ondaatje’s

*The English Patient*

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The contemporary world is filled with the echoes of chaos and disruptions effectuated by the process of colonisation. The dismayed social and economic conditions of the colonised countries embody the savagery of the colonisers who posed threat to the serenity of the world by exercising their power and money to dominate the colonial subjects. The capitalist ideologies of exploration and ascendency over the unexplored parts of the world served as impetus to the warring between the nations. The late 19th and the early 20th centuries witnessed the wide scale explorations of the European countries in America, Africa, and Asia. They assailed most parts of the world for material and economic pursuits. They expanded their empires in the belief that a bigger empire would credit them with more power. The tensions that aroused as a result of the competition between different countries ensued in the world wars.

The world wars distorted the lives of millions of people. The advancements in the field of science and technology that was initially aimed at uplifting the existing condition of man were deployed for destructive purposes. The atomic bombs corroded the entire world with its massive destructive power. The life expectancy of people also minimised to a considerable level owing to the dangers of the world. The horrendous events of war made life more dubious, disruptive and tenuous. Moreover, the imperialistic policy of the colonised countries destabilised the cultural condition of the colonised countries. The intermingling of people from various countries during the process of colonisation has led to the multicultural atmosphere in the colonised countries. The hybrid nature of the people along with the detestable living conditions of the world epitomises the decline of the entire civilisation.

In the novel *The English Patient*, Michael Ondaatje foregrounds the repercussions of Second World War on the life of the people in the postmodern world. He exposes the somber pictures of the post World war horror by exposing the ravages brought about by the colonial aggression. He evinces that the evanescence of the delicate feelings of love and affection dehumanised the life of the human beings. The life in the aftermath of world war was very unstable and horrendous. They were haunted by the impending sense of dangers around them. The random violence that occurred during the war threatened the peaceful existence of the people even after the end of the war.

Ondaatje avouches that the colonisers’ prospect of civilising the colonised countries was in reality aimed at expanding their sphere of influence. They believed that by charting the geographical terrain of the unknown lands that had been in existence from times immemorial, they become the discoverers of the land, “[t]he ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against. . . the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever” (150-151). They exploited the natural resources of the countries for their materialistic benefits. The financial and military despotism of the colonisers helped them in claiming power over the third world countries of the world. They espoused the concepts like trade and power, money and war as the guidelines during the period of colonisation.

Ondaatje avers that the Western world had averted the interest towards the desert for hundreds of years. He remarks that the period between 425 B.C. to the nineteenth century was completely devoid of any explorations except for the few rivers seekers of the nineteenth
century. He explicated that the twentieth century saw a quantum leap in the spirit of exploration
due to colonisation. The British developed correspondence with the Geographical society and
employed several expeditions to map the unexplored deserts of the world. They promoted the
enterprise of the explorers by providing them with the manuals of exploration that is prepared by
privately funded agencies. They also organised several lectures at the Geographical Society in
London at Kensington Gore. Ondaatje mentions that “[t]hese lectures were given by sunburned,
exhausted men who, like Conrad’s sailors, are not too comfortable with the etiquette of taxis, the
quick, flat wit of bus conductors” (141).

The outset of the world war urged the colonisers to map the greater part of the Gulf Kebir
Plateau and the Libyan deserts of Africa. The mightiness of the countries is determined by the
extent of the area occupied. The desert became a strategic arbiter of military wins and losses.
Robert Clark observes in the article “Knotting Desire in Michael Ondaatje’s The English
Patient” that “[m]aps are laws inscribed on the earth. They mark jurisdictions and possessions;
they include and exclude along a line where the power of one ruler comes up to another” (65).

Ondaatje enunciates the experiences of the explorers like Almasy and Madox to
adjudicate the destructive impact of the colonisers on the real nature lovers. These romantic
explorers were involved in mapping North Africa during the inter-war period. They left the safe
domains of their home in search of adventure, ready to face the primitive challenges of the
desert. They had the ability to recognise any part of the town by glimpsing at the skeleton of its
map. They intermingled their culture with that of the Bedouin tribes of the desert, “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” (147).

Almasy considers the desert as a safe haven for the people as it evades the markers of
race and ethnicity. He believed that power and finance were temporary things as time evanesc
the claims of having been the first eyes, the strongest army and the cleverest merchant. He quotes
Herodotus who asserts that “for those cities that were great in earlier times must have now
come 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). His sole aim was to render a unique
contribution to the society by sharing his experiences of exploration with the people around him.

Almasy composed his experiences in a book so as to expose the tremendous glory of the
deserts of Africa. They were regarded as the point of reference for the future explorers who
undertook expeditions to desert. His accounts of the explorations in the Egyptian and Libyan
Deserts successively became “one of the theatres of war” (143). The knowledge that they gain
from these explorers are in turn utilised to destroy them. He and his colleagues were selfless and
dedicated in their pursuit of knowledge but their expertise became one of the instruments of
Empire. In the article “Pastiche and Archetypal Symbolism in Michael Ondaatje’s The English
patient” A. Clare Brandebur posits that “the expertise of the Orientalists of the nineteenth
century, the archaeologists and drawers of maps, the specialists who loved the desert but whose
findings were used by their various governments to exert power over the Third World” (108).

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 could not tolerate
the cruel realities of war, “[s]omeone’s war was slashing apart his delicate tapestry of
companions” (256). The explorers sacrifice their life for the sake of expedition but their
contribution was considered trivial. They do not eulogise the loss of the people who die as a
result of extreme heat, windstorm or due to the ice in Antarctica. Instead, they encouraged the
contributions of the members of the expedition who betrayed the sanctity of the desert.
The scientific aspect of explorations was replaced by the camouflage of agents like George Clifton whose motive is to exploit scientific knowledge for colonial expansion. Clifton, who belonged to the British Intelligence and who had joined the Almasy-Madox expedition during 1931-37 as an amateur, was actually spying on the group as the desert was being controlled by the armies during the war. “He was not just an innocent Englishman . . . . As far as the English were concerned, he was keeping an eye on your strange group in the Egyptian-Libyan desert” (267).

The conflict between the nations degraded the feelings of humanity and compassion towards the fellow beings. The war made the people very wary and suspicious of everything around them. Almasy, who had been in deep love with Clifton’s wife, Katharine rescues her burnt body from the plane crash. He sought the help of the officials to assist him in nursing her back to life but they hauled him up into the truck as they suspected him to be “a possible second-rate spy. Just another international bastard” (267). He could not save her life as his movement was constantly spied over by the Allied troops. He was able to find only her decayed body when he managed to enter the cave with the help of the German spies. Her whole body was covered in bright pigments that reflected the work of cartography marked by nature, by herbs, stones and the ash of acacia.

Ondaatje exposes the horrors of the Second World 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 that is located outside Florence metonymically represents the destruction of civilization. The villa, which draws together the central characters in the novel, is in a state of despair. The hill town in which it is found was besieged for a month during the war and the building and another homestead were the focus of much of the bombing in the area. The hill town is torn apart by fire shells; parts of the villa’s top storey have crumbled under explosions. There was no electricity and so the villa became an unwelcome beacon for robbers. The villa is damaged in such a way that “there seemed little demarcation between the house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth” (45).

The Second World War littered the entire country with dead, half-eaten animals and with the rotting bodies of people hanging upside from the bridges. He evinces that the city is also considered unsafe for people to live. The delayed action bombs were mined into the walls of public buildings and nearly every vehicle that crossed the road was rigged. The retreating German army had left pencil mines within the musical instruments with an intention that the returning owners who opened up the piano would face the danger of losing their hands. They retaliated by killing ten Italians for every German killed. The bombs were sometimes attached to taps, to the spines of books, into the fruit trees and so the apple that would fall from the branch would detonate the tree in some cases. The harbor scuttled ships were freshly mined and a German confesses that “there were thousands of bombs hidden in the harbor section of the city that were wired up to the dormant electrical system” (294).

The war office took over responsibility for bomb disposal, and then it handed it over to Royal Engineers. Twenty five bomb disposal units were set up during this period. “Eighty percent of bombs dropped by airplanes over Britain were thin-walled, general purpose bombs. They usually ranged from a hundred pounds to a thousand” (195). The most dangerous bombs were those dropped from low altitudes, which were not activated until they had landed. These unexploded bombs buried themselves in the cities and fields and remained dormant until their trembler contacts were disturbed by a farmer stick, a car wheel’s nudge, the bounce of a tennis ball against the casing – and then they would explode.
The sappers became permanently suspicious of any object placed casually in the room. They found it impossible to trust anything as concrete at the time of war. They realise that even the concrete thing like buildings and landscape had become just a temporary thing and there is no permanence to it. Even those murdered by the retreating army are still dangerous. The corpses that were hanging down from the bridges were sometimes mined and were blown up in the mid air. They realized that the life became plainly absurd by the end of the war. They overcome the disillusioned that the war is over and everybody can simply go home once the fighting has ended. Ondaatje presents the post world war society as

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

Ondaatje views the process of setting mine fields as the most abominable strategy of treating an entire civilian population as the enemy. He condemns the manipulations of the constructive power of science for destructive purposes. Natania Rosenfeld comments in the article “Less Light: The End(s) of Aestheticism in Pater, Ondaatje and Sebald” that the novel highlights “the incongruity of natural and manmade disasters. The flash of a bomb blast may resemble lighting, but the former indicates man’s terrible manipulations of nature, not his harmony with, or even his mimesis of natural world” (358-359).

Ondaatje imputes the machinations of capitalist reification by presenting the appallingly high casualty rates in bomb disposal units mass in 1940 when Britain was caught in a state of siege after the falling of France. The life expectancy of the sappers during this period was about ten weeks. In the month of August 1940, the blitz had begun and the sappers noticed that there were almost 2,500 unexploded bombs mined in all parts of the country. The roads were closed and the factories and streets were deserted owing to the dangers of the bomb. The ration increased gradually and by the month of September the number of live bomb had reached 3,700. The death toll increased continuously during this period

Ondaatje considers that the Second World War has destroyed the utopian vision of the world. The modern inventions of man like Atomic bombs and other delayed action bombs ruined the peace of the people. There was no safety and security for the lives of the common man who remained ignorant of the devastating schemes of the rulers. He regards that the instrumentalisation of reason in technology has taken one of its most perverted forms. The linguistic adaption to death contains the schema of modern mathematics. “If a man’s life could be capitalized as X, the risk at Y, and the estimated damage from explosion at V, then a logician might contend that if V is less than X over Y, the bomb should be blown up; but if V over Y is greater than X, an attempt should be made to avoid explosion in Situ” (212).

The war disillusioned the lives of the people. The routine life of the people was almost completely shattered with the explosion of the atomic bomb. Almasy finds it difficult to continue reading after the war, since the war has ended with an event so terrible that even the act of lighting a match feels dangerous. He alludes to the world wars as the most terrible incidents in the history of the world. Sudha Rai in the article entitled “Ondaatje’s The English Patient: Ideology and Form” examines how Ondaatje’s the novel is 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).
Ondaatje presents a vivid picture of the horrors of the war so as to avert the world wars in the future. He appeals to the humanity in general to foster a sense of loyalty and kindness to the fellow beings. He ascertains that only when the boons of science and technology is mobilised in a constructive way, the life becomes meaningful. He calls for a utopian society where human beings can live without the horrors and terrors of the outside world.

Works Cited:


