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## Postmodern ‘Metaphor of Reading’ in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper is a modest attempt to set forth postmodern reading of Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* (1992). The current novel is structured in the postmodern genre of historiographic metafiction that subverts the Eurocentric history reading by undermining the master narrative of the western power game, arisen after II World War. The chronicled account of the map maker Ladislaus de Almásy, the protagonist of the novel intentionally obtains the postmodern strategies of 'reading'. It connects itself with the vital gap and emptiness caused because of the divided and broken individual and public histories in the post-war world.

Subsequently, an imaginative critical reading in the postmodern strategies brings up the restricted peripheral stories into spotlight. The prime characters introduced in the novel, read books to think about their own life and associate with some other place or time. The current paper is divided into three parts. The first part gives a structure of postmodern strategies of reading; the second part manages the investigation of effect of reading books on the individual, passionate, and mental existences of these characters, and the last part of the paper foregrounds the research findings.

Thus, the present paper is a modest attempt to analyze how Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* pinpoints the numerous acts of reading that break normative boundaries of

fiction and reality and attributes not only a new perspective on what it constitutes 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' but also inspects on the concepts of 'colonial' and the 'postcolonial'.

**Keywords: modernism, postmodernism, metaphor of reading, postcolonial, historiographic metafiction.**

## I

The present research paper attempts to analyze postmodern 'metaphor of reading' in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992). The unconventional historiographic metafiction examines the strategies of reading through various intertexts and explores how the non-violent and private activity of reading challenges the post-war realities.

Ondaatje, born in Sri Lankan lineage, is a famous Canadian novelist, whose fiction crosses the borders of nations and goes beyond the trans-national and trans-cultural locations. His novel, set in the hills of Tuscany during II World War, is a masterpiece of Canadian historiographic metafiction. It is though apparently worldwide in its subjects; its setting is localized in a small villa in post-war Italy. It is a spectrum of various themes such as love, friendship, healing, death, assimilation and many others that are universal. He offers the disintegrated and damaged idea concerning the subjectivity and textuality. The characters and structure of the novel highlights the postmodernist view of identity through the genre of historiographic metafiction.

The protagonist of the present text is an anonymous person, burned beyond identification. Throughout the novel, his identity remains a matter of doubts and suspicion. So, his blurred and fluctuating identity is fixed by people who treat his burned body. This complicated instance of self-identification in post-war world is an example of changing notions that explore the impact of postmodernism. Although the hospital was being shifted to Pisa, the tender and innocent Hana rejects to leave her only "patient". Carrivagio, when he was in the hospital, hears about Hana and joins her in the villa. Kip, the young Indian Sikh, works as sapper, arrives to the villa in search of mines in the surrounding areas of the villa. The fragmentation in the setting, where the action of plot occurs, symbolizes the crises of identity. The unconventional narrative of Ondaatje problematizes the notions of identity through postmodernism that gives him liberty and the joy of

writing by breaking down the conventional methodology of presenting ideas. This chaos of identity indicates the “disorganized humanity”.

The most significant and recurrent issue that dominates the main plotline, simultaneously, is *Reading*. The only object a reader can encounter within literature is the book they hold in their hands. *The English Patient*, to some extent, can be labelled a post-colonial novel, as it offers the readers numerous instances of parallel ex-centric narratives, creating many peripheral stories by disintegrating the centre. On the one hand, the narrative of the text revolves around the burned English patient, and the dead Katharine who represents the world before the war, and Europe’s exploration and discovery of Africa. On the other, the world of Hana, Kip and Caravaggio indicate the future. As compared to the reliable and conventional realistic historical fictions, in Ondaatje’s fiction, the readers experience the narrative chaos, as they are assigned the task of enquiring the definitive meaning.

The aim of postmodern reading lays in exposure to otherness. The sort of reading strategy allows readers to perceive the text under attention. It is viewed that postmodern reading tactic neither articulate any particular theory nor involve readers in any tour de force of analysis. The most dominant aspect of postmodern reading approach means intertextual reading. This feature of postmodern style of reading does n’t seal off and limits any text completely; however, it connects one text with another and seeks between them influences and echoes. These intertextual connections among various texts may be intentional or unintentional, deliberate or careless. The almost postmodern novels employ intertextuality in their works which goes beyond from the Bible to popular culture. Thus, this strategy throws light on the altering role of the reader and the postmodern “loss of self”. To be more particular, postmodern criticism, conclusively, focuses on the relation between reader and text. In this context, Hoffmann et al rightly states the job of the postmodern reader when they put it: “From a communicational point of view, modernism seems to stress the relationship between the creative sensibility and the work of art, between addresser and message, postmodernism that between message and addressee” (Hoffmann et al. 1977,40). Holland, another critic, consequently, points out that meaning in any text is generated through the continuous process of interactions between reader and text.

This postmodern notion of reading tends to challenge readers’ cultural conventions of the role and purpose of literature. Hence, it remains crystal clear that reading of any postmodern text

does n't limit itself only to the receiving of narrative. However, it necessitates active reading, reply and response to the text, and reflecting on the act of reading itself. In the light of these postmodern reading strategies, it is appropriate to know how Barthes differentiates literature as "writerly" and "readerly". The first category focuses on the author; however, the later type of literature assigns the readers an innovative role between author and reader. Postmodern literature calls readers to interpret, however, at the same time, it shows the impossibility of reaching towards the final meaning.

In postmodernism, the readers' response obtains a great deal of attention in critical theory. It represents a shift from the kind of text-centered criticism that dominated Anglo-American literature for several decades. This theory of postmodernism developed out of modernism and reader-response criticism in reply to New Criticism. French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur's in his book *Oneself as Another* (1992), states that identity not only influences actions, agents and selves as one's life takes the form of a story, but also the past and the present. According to him, the self, attempts to reconsider both the past and the present by remembering. His notions about identity connect reading as a self-defining act and book is a vehicle of numerous stories. The nonviolent and isolated act of reading contrasts to the world before and after post-war realities in Ondaatje's novel.

## II

The burned English patient is not only a companion of Hana, in an Italian Villa, but also a mentor, who introduces her in the art of reading. Hence, for the main characters of the novel, the metaphor of reading not only opens the records of history, but also enables narrative structure to connect war and art. Ondaatje through his patient utilizes reading for aesthetic pleasure and for the purpose of peacetime relaxation as he states:

“Read him slowly, dear girl, you must read Kipling slowly. Watch carefully where the commas fall so you can discover the natural pauses. He is a writer who used pen and ink. He looked up from the page a lot, I believe, stared through his window and listened to birds, as most writers who are alone do. Some do not know the name of birds, though he did. Your eye is too quick and North American. Think about the speed of his pen. What an appalling, barnacled old

first paragraph it is otherwise.”That was the English patient’s first lesson about reading” (100).

Thus, through the practices of reading books, these characters relate whatever happens to them, with the plots and actions presented in the other referred intertexts in the novel. Hence, the metaphor of reading becomes the most complex workout for characters through which they understand and connect to each other.

Herodotus’ book *The Histories* joins the various real factors existing all the while in the main chronicled story of Almásy, the desert explorer. One truth is not any more genuine than another is; somewhat, it relies on audiences decision of which reality to depend on and acknowledge. Almásy’s way of overwriting in his copy of *The Histories*, shows how he precisely rewrites history, and depends upon his own insight, opposite to his own historian ancestor. Similarly, the audience should select a reality when they hear or read the story.

His love with Katharine, Clifton's better half, develops when she reads the narrative of Candaules from Herodotus. He admits that after meeting to Katharine, he starts connecting himself with the story of Candaules:

“I always skim past that story. It is early in the book and has little to do with the places and period I am interested in” (232).

Before this, he had no concern in the “cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history” (126). The story of Candaules, read by Katharine, for her husband and the patient with charming style and tone, nurtures the feelings in patient’s mind and so he gives up the objective meaninglessness of the oasis society and enters the private domain of personal history.

In his common book, the two histories unite at the point where his private affair with Katharine becomes the first step towards his public act of betrayal. As he learns from Caravaggio, this union took place from the moment he fell in love with her: Caravaggio highlights how the patient becomes the victim Katharine’s reading style and states him that “You had become the enemy not when you sided with Germany but when you began your affair with Katharine Clifton” (254-55). It highlights that in Ondaatje, postmodern strategies of reading focuses on the power paradigm based on certain rules of storytelling such as who tells them, and by how they are told.

Hana, another main character, influenced by the reading process, reads the stories from *Kim*, *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Histories* and also listens the stories of the patient.

Hence, for her, the personal story of the patient becomes a fiction, another fiction, alongside the other fictions that she reads. The three other 'ex-centric' characters disturb the main historical narrative of the patient frequently and deliberately. These interferences of *others'* stories create flux in making of the meaning. So, the novel challenges the traditional view about history's objective and constant status.

Contrastingly, the reading strategy of these characters compels to seek the multiple readings of history through different versions of it. Besides this, the complicated form of history and knowledge is also endorsed by Hana's involvement in the reading of books and the patient's exemplified style of listening. It permits both the damaged individuals in the Italian villa to reintroduce their faith in the world adjacent to them. Thus, reading enables the shell-shocked nurse to walk through "the only door out of her cell" (7) and emerge into "the lives of others" (13). Ondaatje avoids to present thorough knowledge of certain facts and experiences and provides some deliberate gaps in stories he sketches in the novel. The blanks in the memory of the English patient that cause gaps in the stories seem author's deliberate strategy. These novelistic tactics compel readers to hold the obligation of filling in gaps. These gaps "like sections of a road washed out by storms" (7) which compel the reader to fill eventually.

Hana's relationship with books is so vast that they become "half her world" (7), a crucial tool, by which she heals the emotional trauma of herself and the *English* patient, to whom she reads every night after giving him a dose of morphine. The patient later reveals:

"the only way [he] could get her to communicate was to ask her to read [him]" because she "would not talk about (her trauma) as she was distant from everybody" (269).

The physical impression of reading aloud, merges her voice with the author's, as she represents authorial voice's narrative agency. Her reading is an active experience; because the words become the nourishment that she imbibes for strength and drug that heals the trauma. Hana's association and affection with books covertly deal with Western ideology of selfhood through authorship. This notion of selfhood and authorship is explicitly demonstrated when Hana heals her emotional trauma through the act of reading. Interestingly, she begins to expose her

dominance over the books by writing pieces of her life story in their margins. Thus, Hana, through the act of reading, attempts to build up her self-identity.

Caravaggio, a thief, whose professional skills are authenticated during wartime, is in search of unknown burnt man, considers words to be “tricky things,” as one of his friends told him, “much more tricky than violins” (37). He believes “books are mystical creatures” (81).

Another significant character, Kip, discards the Eurocentric reading of history. By this act of him, he stands for an openly postcolonial character who relates to reading very differently and does not trust books. The English patient corrects Kip’s pronunciation while reading Kipling’s novel *Kim* in the context of the abstract rules of Standard English. The patient’s disapproval of Kip’s reading being “too fast” reflects in Kip’s “impatient” eyes and so the patient expects that Kip has to “think about the speed of Kipling’s pen” (100). Kip does not have the same innate trust for the written word as his companions in the villa.

Kip’s revolutionary brother teaches him that almost all the books contain European narratives, ideologies, and glorify violent acts. When Kip examines the part of his bomb disposal kit, he begins to read a manual that aim to explain, “when is an explosion reasonably permissible?” (224). He wonders, “who wrote such things?” (224) the only logical answer to this is British. It reinforces the violent potential of the English language in an imperial context, where words are used to justify the taking of human lives. His conclusion to keep books at arm’s length indicates “as if language, humanity, would confuse him, get, like blood, into the machine he had to understand” (290). Language, for him, has blood on its hands. The overall perception of Kip about the act of reading and books alters when he undergoes the trauma of USA’s bomb dropping incident on Japan. He starts criticizing Western nations for having the amenities like ships, printings, and dominating histories. Kip problematizes the very idea of books that widely spread information on the novel’s most violent event and books compel him to criticize his British masters and decide to return to India.

### III

The postmodern metaphor of reading reflected throughout the novel asserts some autobiographical influence on Ondaatje. While writing this novel, he highlights his love for extensive reading and interest in describing the features of the books that his characters read. A

postcolonial reading may recognize elements of colonial oppression in the interactions of the character of Count Ladislaus de Almásy and Kirpal Singh, their relationship also consists of multiple reflexive layers evolving from personal ideas of truth, identity, and experiences, which cannot be entirely explained by their position within a Western-Eastern opposition.

Thus, Ondaatje succeeds in using postmodern themes to create a unique reading experience. Although readers of *The English Patient* surround in the non-sequential and strange orders of reading, they can still rely on the unique connection and coherence. The fragmentary and repetitive narrative discourse of the novel skillfully amalgamates all the fragments together to get a more understandable picture of a world that rejects the straightforward progression of a beginning, a middle, and an end.

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