

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 3.9

Vol. 3 Issue 6

Dec. 2017

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

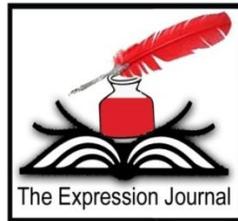
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The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 3.9)

www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132



ANALYZING TRAUMA IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

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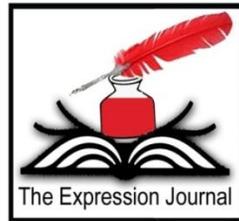
Abstract

Philip Michael Ondaatje (born 1943) is a versatile writer who was born in Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka. He is a poet, novelist, essayist, filmmaker and editor. He has received many prestigious awards as well. He has written his novels about the trauma of his characters, whose personal lives are seen, more or less, affected by the war. He began his career by writing poetry with the publication of poetry collection *The Dainty Monsters* (1967) and after this book; he published another poetry collection *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970). Apart from these, he has tried his hand in the fiction writing also. He has written seven novels till today. Among them, he is well-known for these works: *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), *The English Patient* (1992), *Anil's Ghost* (2000), *The Cat's Table* (2011), etc. This paper is an honest attempt to analyse and examine the person trauma in the life of four main characters – Almásy, Hana, David Caravaggio and Kirpal Singh (Kip) – of the novel. They belong to different nationalities and all of them strive to assert their identity in their own way. They get together in an Italian villa and share their problems of life.

Keywords

South Asian Diaspora, Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, Canadian Fiction, Sri Lankan Writer, Identity, Cultural Clash, World War II, Human Predicaments.

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Trauma plays an important role in literature and many writers have touched the theme of traumas, tragedies and loss in their words. This word has been taken from the Greek word *Traumatikos* which means a deep wound to body. Peichl writes that trauma can be taken “as a toxic condition, a mixture of intense anxiety, absolute helplessness and a loss of control” (Peichl: 2007 23). Lenore Terr writes in her work “Trauma Theory Abbreviated,” “Psychic trauma occurs when a sudden unexpected overwhelming intense emotional blow or series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind” (Bloom 2). Earlier this word was used for the psychological injuries but now-a-days, this word is being used for the emotional wounds. This fact cannot be ignored that a traumatic event can leave behind the psychological scars on the human mind. Slavoj Zizec, a dangerous philosopher also comments about trauma in his book *Living in the End Times*:

If the Freudian name for the “unknown knowns” is the Freudian name for the “unknown unknowns” is *trauma*, Unconscious, the violent intrusion of something radically unexpected, something the subject was absolutely not ready for, and which it cannot integrate in any way. (Zizec 292)

The novel *The English Patient* (1992) has been written about the personal tragedies of four persons from their own perspectives. The novel has been written in ten chapters. Every person is stuck in one or another kind of trauma and Ondaatje's characters are its fine examples because Ondaatje's novels have more than sufficient material in it. Sadiya Abubakar writes about the role of trauma in literature, “In literary studies, some narratives with traumatic themes, moods and tones are eminent in keeping alive a psychological wound alongside telling others the pains in a traumatic experience” (Abubakar 120).

The novel *The English Patient* has been written in the flashback technique and the story is about four characters – Almásy, Hana, David Caravaggio and Kirpal Singh (Kip). These four characters suffer from their own personal tragedies. S. Poorna Mala Devi writes about these characters, “In *The English Patient*, all these four characters discover relationships and belonging beyond the borders of nationalistic claims over identity” (559). S. Poorna Mala Devi also postulates about this novel:

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ISSN: 2395-4132

The English Patient is a novel that seeks to explore the problem of identity and displacement, experienced both by colonizer and colonized. In the novel, a number of themes have been outlined by Ondaatje such as race, ethnicity, identity, history, nationalism, Western colonialism, romance, war, and the human body. The problem of identity is one of the most important issues for the post-modern epoch. (553)

The most important character of this novel is an English patient Almásy who is suffering from his own problems. He is a Hungarian and he has been working as a desert explorer since 1930. He is called the English patient throughout the novel because of his British accent. He is the man who was burned in a plane-crash to this extent that he could not be recognized, "She has got her own ghost, a burned patient. There is a face but it is unrecognizable. The nerves all gone" (28). His whole face was burned and he looks like a ghost. For others, he is not less than a ghost but his nurse Hana takes care of him properly and devotes her time for his service. When all other people leave the English patient, it was Hana who takes care of him. She is much worried about him. She reads books for him, bathes him and tells him stories about the world. Thus, Michael Ondaatje has depicted how the English patient is depended on Hana. Ondaatje writes how Hana and the English patient have different nationalities but they establish heart-to-heart relationships. Cengiz Karagöz postulates about Michael Ondaatje:

Ondaatje wants to underline the impossibility of associating people with certain national and cultural identities as they bear out their existing not within the bounds of peculiar norms but within a vacuum in which these bounds are merged with each other. (Karagöz 41)

Almásy shares the incident how he was burned. In fact, Almásy was a desert explorer or a map maker. He explored ancient cities and maps lands also. He had a crush with Geoffrey Clifton's wife, Katharine. He saw Katharine singing at one occasion and fell in love with her. Katharine was very frightened from her husband because she knew if he comes to know about her affair, he would kill her. She says, "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do! How can I be your lover? He will go mad" (153). That's why their affair could not last for a long time and one day Katharine tells Almásy frankly that she cannot live in this relationship anymore.

"We will never love each other again. We can never see each other again."

"I know," he says.

...

"Never again. Whatever happens."

"Yes."

"I think he will go mad. Do you understand?" (156-57)

But unfortunately, Hana's husband sees them together and understands everything. He plans to kill both of them in a helicopter crash but he misses his target. He dies in this crash and Katharine gets severely injured. He takes Katharine to a nearby cave and informs that he will come back soon. He goes to the British Army for help but instead of help, they imprison him. When he returns there after three years, he finds Katherine dead. He gets shocked to see Katharine's dead body. He puts Katharine's dead body in the plane and but when the plane takes off, it catches fire because fuel was scattered in the plane. Almásy jumps from the plane parachuted but he gets burned. Kristina Kyser asserts about Ondaatje's characters, "[Ondaatje's] characters [...] oscillate between this connection with others and a tendency to withdraw from the world" (Kyser 3). He

was saved by Bedouins, "They unwrapped the mask of herbs from his face" (8). After that he meets Hana in the nunnery hospital. He considers himself an outsider and is fed up with his life. He says:

"Kip and I are both international bastards-born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our home lands all our lives. Though Kip doesn't recognize that yet. That's why we get on so well together" (188-189).

So far as the second tragic character Hana is concerned, she is a twenty-year-old nurse. She has lost her beloved and father in the Second World War. She loved a Canadian officer but he dies in war. After that incident, she thinks herself accursed and that's why she does not want to get married with anybody. She started working as a nurse from the age of eighteen. She lives in Villa Sans Girolamo in Italy. The major part of the novel is set in 1945 in this villa. This villa was once an army hospital but after the war, all the patients have been shifted to other hospitals. Hana is very generous and she takes care of the English patient. She does gardening also. She takes risk of her life because this villa was not safe for her because bombs may explode at any time. Earlier she was not emotionally attached with the patients during the war and she had seen many patients dying. It was only Almásy with whom she gets emotionally attached and thinks him a saint like figure.

The third character of the novel is David Caravaggio who was a professional thief and worked for the British intelligence service. He is called the man with the bandaged hands. Michael Ondaatje writes about him, "The man with the bandaged hands had been in the military hospital in Rome for more than four months when by accident he heard about the burned patient and the nurse" (27). Hana tells Caravaggio that she can remove his bandages as she is a nurse but Caravaggio tells that the bandages are comfortable to him like gloves, "They are conformable like gloves" (54). He is the friend of Hana's father and was Hana's school teacher also in her childhood. He brings the news of death of Hana's father. Hana is shocked to hear this news and she is filled with remorse that despite being a nurse, she could not save the life of her father. That's why she determines to save the life of the English patient.

Caravaggio's was caught stealing the camera of a woman and both of his thumbs were amputated. That's why he keeps bandages on his hands. He is in extreme pain and that's why he has to take morpheme to reduce his pain. Like him, the English patient is also given morpheme so that he may not feel pain. He wants to have physical relationships with Hana but Hana tells him to remain away from him. The below conversation shows that Caravaggio does not like Hana's over-engagement with the English patient:

"Why do you adore him so much?"

"I love him."

"You don't love him. You adore him."

"Go away, Caravaggio. Please."

"You've tied yourself to a corpse for some reason."

"He is a saint. I think. A Despairing saint...." (45)

The fourth tragic character of the novel is Kirpal Singh (Kip). One night when Hana was playing the piano, two soldiers come there. One of them is Kip who is a sapper or bomb diffuser in the British Army. He tells Hana that German army has set up some bombs and there may be chances of bomb even in the piano. He diffuses a bomb in the villa with the help of Hana. When Kip was diffusing a bomb, Hana gets attracted towards Kip's dark colour and his muscular body. In fact, she falls in love with him. When he leaves Italy, goes to India and becomes a doctor, Hana keeps writing letters to him but Kip does not reply her.

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Kip is considered an outsider in this novel because he is from Punjab. He is a product of colonialism. Homi K. Bhabha also writes that “the colonial stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive, and demands not only that we extend our critical and political objectives but that we change the object of analysis itself” (Bhabha 16). Kip has dual identity and he becomes out of control when he gets the news the America has dropped bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Arathi Babu writes about Kip in this context:

Kip therefore has a dual belonging to India as well as to Britain. But this hybridity is rejected by him when Hiroshima and Nagasaki are bombed, which forces him to reject English culture altogether. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki enrages him. This incident makes him renounce the West. Kip also threatens to kill the English Patient, whom he regards as a symbol of the West because he believes he is English. (9)

Kip plans to kill the English patient because he thinks that the English patient is an embodiment of the English. The English patient also says that he can kill him if he wishes because he has lost all the charm of his life. Bhabha defines mimicry as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its distance” (Bhabha 86).

The natives do not accept Kip as a member of the crew. His brother also suggests him not to go to England. Michael Ondaatje writes about him, “Kip is a foreigner to English culture when he first arrives in India. Singh had arrived in England knowing no one, distanced from his family in the Punjab. He was twenty-one years old. He had met no one but soldiers” (187). He eating habits are also the mixture of two different cultures. He eats fruits, herbs and onions at the villa which surprises Caravaggio. His inmates of the villa take around a week to understand his demands in context of his eating habits. The other members of the villa compare his food habits with an animal. He enjoys sipping the tea that shows his interest in the western beverage.

Kip does not have a good experience with the English culture. The natives want him to fight for them but they don't want even to talk to him, “The English! They expect you to fight for them but won't talk to you” (188). He personally feels that he has lost the motive of his life. That's why Michael Ondaatje also writes about him, “His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here” (287).

Kip has another reason for his sadness. Lord Suffolk is Kip's mentor in the bomb-diffusing unit of British Army. Kip feels very happy to meet a gentleman like Lord Suffolk. He considers him like his surrogate father. Kip becomes very sad when his mentor dies in an attempt of diffusing a bomb. After his death, Kip is expected to take the place of his mentor by becoming the leader of the group but Kip does not think so and he prefers to take an escape route from it. He starts working as a bomb-diffuser in Italy. He does not want to talk to anybody and wants to remain happy in his own world.

One common theme in all these four characters is that these four characters are exiled from their homeland and are gathered at the Italian villa. *The English Patient* hails from Hungary and he is burned so much that he cannot be identified by his face. Hana is an Italian nurse who is on the verge of previous breakdown due to her father's death in the World War II. Caravaggio is an Italian-Canadian and both of his thumbs are amputated. Kip is also an expatriate who comes in the villa in search of mines. He is considered just like an outsider by everyone. Thus, the novel *The English Patient* deals with the personal traumas of these four characters.

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ISSN: 2395-4132

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