
UNIT 17 CANADIAN-SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORIC WRITING

Structure

- 17.0 Objectives
- 17.1 Introduction
- 17.2 Diasporas in General : A Brief Introduction
- 17.3 Diasporic Criticism
- 17.4 Conclusion
- Questions

17.0 OBJECTIVES

In this brief unit we shall introduce students to what is meant by the term 'diaspora'. We shall also offer them a glimpse of Canadian-South Asian diasporic writing in general.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

In the 1960 and 1970s a large number of South Asians came to Canada. Many of these were writers. Michael Ondaatje and Rienzi Crusz were notable Sri Lankans who started living in Canada. Rohinton Mistry and Uma Parmeswaran from India are also diasporic writers.

'Diaspora' refers to 'dispersal' and diasporic writings are concerned with the individual's or community's attachment to the centrifugal homeland. Sometimes their subject is the life they have left behind. Sometimes again the subject is the immigrant experience.

One notable novel in the domain takes us a little outside the South Asian diaspora. This novel is Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981). It looks back from the perspective of a second-generation Japanese at the internment and dispersal of Japanese families in Canada during the Second World War. The same applied to the Italian immigrant Nino Ricci's 1990 novel *Lives of the Saints* and the West Indian Neil Bissoundath's *A Casual Brutality* (1988).

Rienzi Crusz is South Asian but is not a novelist. His poetry nevertheless gives us a good insight into the sense of being diasporic. His poem 'Conversations with God About My Present Whereabouts' from the book of poems named *Elephant and Ice* (1980) is interesting. Crusz writes:

True, I often miss
the sensuous touch of fingers
on the shying touch-me-not,
the undergrowth's pink badge of bruise,
cacophony of crows,
the rain that pelted my thin bones.

But I am perfect now.
Seduced on shaven grass,
My barbecue glows
Like a small hell,

17.2 DIASPORAS IN GENERAL : A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The South Asian diaspora is more than 11 million strong. Though smaller than the African or the Chinese diasporas—supposed to number approximately 200 million and 30 million respectively—it is more widely spread across the world and more varied. People of Indian origin now reside in over seventy countries, across all the continents of the world, from Surinam to Singapore, from Canada to Australia. Its members come from several regions of India; they profess about a dozen religions and belong to hundreds of castes and sub-castes. What interests me the most is the relationship of this diaspora to its motherland, India. More specifically, I would like to examine how India is imaged, defined, and narrated in the texts of the diaspora.

From Surinam in South America, to Fiji in the Pacific, there are sizeable South Asian populations spread across the globe. In countries like Mauritius, Guyana, Fiji, Trinidad, and Surinam, their numbers range from 35 to 70 per cent of the total population. It may not be necessary to offer an overview of this South Asian diaspora because the details are well known. Some things are however overlooked. The first is the extent to which South Asian brawn and brains have contributed to the making of the world, as we know it. After the abolition of slavery, much of the labour that went into the building of the colonial world came from India. Indian coolies and workers not only toiled on plantations, but cleared forests, built roads and railways, worked on construction sites and in industries, and now play a vital role in science and technology, education, business and trade, and the arts and literature all the world over. Indian soldiers served ably in the two wars, many thousands of them perishing in battlefields far away from home. Indian blue-collar workers helped rebuild Europe after World War 2; their labour is one of the major causes of the greening and prosperity of Middle East. Lately, they are playing an active role in the creation of the cyber world of the future and can be found in nearly every important institution of higher learning throughout the Western world. This massive and magnificent contribution is often ignored or disregarded. The second point is that all over their areas of migration, South Asians have been mistreated and discriminated against. Next only to the Africans perhaps, it is the South Asians have been mistreated and discriminated against. Next only to the Africans perhaps, it is the South Asians who have borne the brunt of injustice, oppression and racism the world over. Deprived of their rights in South Africa and Canada, driven out of Burma and Uganda, upstaged in the Caribbean and Fiji, and still discriminated against in most Western countries, South Asians have nevertheless not just survived, but prospered.

Of course, we need to remember that nations, empires, and diasporas evolve simultaneously. There is an overlap and slippage between these categories. In this the work of Vijay Mishra is significant because it marks a considerable advance over earlier formulations. Mishra privileges the diasporic to the level of a special epistemology, which can be used to define postcoloniality itself. For instance, in 'New Lamps for Old: Diasporas Migrancy Border', Mishra considers his essay to be, among other things, 'a celebration of diasporas as the exemplary condition of late modernity'. Mishra contrasts the diasporic consciousness with older, primordial, ethnic identities, arguing that diasporic epistemology locates itself squarely in the realm of the hybrid, in the domain of cross-cultural and contaminated social and cultural regimes. In this, Mishra is akin to Bhabha who also elevates the hybrid to the level of a new consciousness the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory or a negative transparency. Neither

refers to the fact that diasporic communities are known, at times, to support the most rabidly violent and fanatical of causes, not just ideologically but financially. In South Asia, for instance, it is well known that Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Tamil, and other militants have been supported by overseas communities.

The nature of the diaspora, its cultural location and politics, consequently, depend on the nature of the host, not just on that of the diaspora. Diasporas, despite their common origin, may behave in a totally different manner depending on their country of relocation. A host country like the USA, for example, ostensibly does not distinguish between immigrants and diasporic people. Officially, all are the same to her; and all those who enter have the opportunity of instant assimilation, of fashioning themselves anew.

On a closer examination of the entire South Asian diaspora, we notice that it falls into two distinct phases. To begin with, they can be called settler and visitor diasporas, taking our cue from *The Empire Writes Back*, which identifies settler and invader colonialists. Of course, both these phrases are not entirely appropriate, but may serve for the time being. To the first category belong all those forced migrations on account of slavery or indentured labour, while the second would encompass the voluntary migrations of businessmen and professionals who went abroad in search of fortune. These two distinct groups may be defined not just by the causes and patterns of their migration, but also by the historical period in which the migrations took place. Furthermore, these two diasporas may also be contrasted by their destinations, class and class backgrounds, attitude to the mother country, economic status, language of creative expression, market access, and so on. Mishra tells us that this narrative of diasporic movement is, however, not continuous or seamless as there is a radical break between the older diasporas of classic capitalism and the mid-to late twentieth-century diasporas of advanced capital to the metropolitan centres of the Empire, the New World and the former settler colonies.

How do diasporas construct homelands? They do so in accordance with their own needs and compulsions. In the case of the older diaspora, we see a certain break with the motherland. This break was not voluntary, but enforced by the distances between the motherland and the diasporic settlement, the older, much slower modes of travel and above all, the lack of economic means to make frequent journeys. In fact, the labourers who were shipped out rarely had enough money to make the journey back to India; for most, it was a one-way ticket to another land. In other words, the distance, both physical, but more so psychological, was so vast, that the motherland remained frozen in the diasporic imagination as a sort of sacred site or symbol, almost like an idol of memory and imagination. The poverty of the homeland, which caused the diaspora in the first place, was forgotten or overwritten with the *feeling* that it was home, a place where the present alienation of the diasporic person did not exist. Because a physical return was virtually impossible, an emotional or spiritual renewal was an ongoing necessity. This was done through a process of replication, if not reproduction. In the case of Hindus. The old diaspora carried with it a sort of 'Hindu toolbox' to Indianise its new surroundings.

The manner in which the new diaspora imagines India is therefore to be understood in terms of the logic of this dominant culture, of which it is an ambivalent or unwilling part. While the old diaspora was cut off from the motherland, the new diaspora has unprecedented access to it by virtue of its privileged non-resident-Indian status. What we see, then, is a narrative logic of continuous incorporation and appropriation which reinforces the self validating logic of the new diaspora. Not forced to leave the motherland, these writers have chosen to relocate themselves in the metropolitan centres chiefly for economic gains. This breeds in them a certain anxiety, if not guilt towards the homeland. In the international literary marketplace there is, and has always been, a niche market for fictional representations of India. Earlier, this Anglo-Indian slot was occupied by English, European, and American writers; now the South Asians have moved in.

It can be argued that the lines dividing the older and newer diasporas are fast disappearing. The old diaspora can now be theorised primarily in chronological terms. Ideologically, its descendants are more akin to the new diaspora. This merger of the most privileged members and, therefore, the most articulate members of the old diaspora-what we might call the literature producing elite-into the new one takes place through a variety of processes. Chiefly, it is by a second migration from, say the Caribbean to North America or Western Europe, from East Africa to Britain, from Malaysia and Sri Lanka to Australia. Through this second wave of relocation, the old diaspora incorporates itself into the new one, sharing its economic and cultural privileges. There is also a less dramatic, but quite persuasive process of reverse osmosis in which the values, beliefs, and consciousness of the new diaspora finds its way into that of the old, largely through a process which we call globalisation today. The gap between metropolitan and sub-metropolitan cultures is thus diminishing. Global access to cultures also means multiple choices of identities. What it does not mean is that cultural or civilisational differences, rooted as they are in thousands of years of history of material production will be erased easily forgotten. But what we see is a complex pattern of overlaying whereby older cultures acquire the veneer and appearance of newer ones. This veneer may be a surface without substance, but it has a certain power and eloquence. Like a mask or a disguise, it smuggles in older mentalities into the brave new digital world of virtual reality. The tension between surface textures and deep structures often results in curious and complex cultural tropes in which the old and the new contend or compromise in unusual ways. In a new global environment, diasporas and homelands may, paradoxically, come much closer to each other than ever before. Yet, this closeness will not necessarily camouflage their divergent interests or politics of representation.

17.3 DIASPORIC CRITICISM

Sudesh Mishra is a critic, who has tried to go into the way diaspora criticism, a genre of theoretical writings, marks itself off as a domain by concerning itself with the entity called 'diaspora'. He uses the classical diasporic groups (Jewes and Americans) as a point of departure and then argues that diasporists attempt to account for the mass dispersal of various ethnic collectives in the time of (late) modernity. Special alteration is given to hybrid identity formations, multiple identifications and double consciousness.

Mishra has an essay called 'Diaspora Criticism' in Julian Wolfreys (ed) *21st Century Criticism*. Mishra tells us at the outset that the term 'diaspora' was used to designate specific 'social formations' that are exemplary communities of the transnational moments. This use is attributed to Khachig Toloyan one of the founding editors of the multidisciplinary journal *Diaspora* (inaugural issue 1991). Toloyan refers to the term in that way on page 5 of that issue.

On page 22 of the book *21st Century Criticism* Sudesh Mishra states:

One of the persistent dilemmas confronting diasporic criticism is how to configure diasporic subjectivity as hybrid, liminal, border and hyphenated without recourse to the strategy of consigning non-diasporic groups to imaginary domains of non-liminability are so one.

Mishra's conclusion is:

As an interdisciplinary genre of theoretical writing devoted to issues relating to identity politics, migratory subjectivity, identifications, group taxonomy and double consciousness, diaspora criticism is at its strongest when investigating verities of continuity and discontinuity that exist (1) within and across the different diasporic formations, (2)

within and across their various cultural and aesthetic productions; and
(3) between one social formation and its cultural aesthetic effects.
(pp.31-32)

Critics like Victor Ramraj and Uma Parmeswaran have tried to come to terms with 'diaspora' and diasporic writing. Parmeswaran, for example, states that her own destiny as a member of a diaspora is fraught with a variety of tensions. She also states that people who move away from their native countries not only occupy but also bequeath to subsequent generations a luminosity, an uneasy pull between the cultures.

For the postcolonial writer the phenomenon of exile and expatriation is quite complex. There is a cusp created by the intersection of the cultures, which is the expatriate 'space'. The idea of 'home' is of particular concern to most exiles or expatriates.

Sometimes the subject of 'diasporic' writing is the immigrant experience. Sometimes such writers take as their subject the life they have left behind. Uma Parmeswaran's fine story – 'The Door I Shut Behind Me' is a good example of the first kind of writing. Rohinton Mistry's novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991) is a good example of the latter kind of writing.

17.4 CONCLUSION

Canadian diasporic writing by writers hailing from South Asia is a very rich body of writing and has an important place in contemporary Canadian writing. Writers like Michael Ondaatje have given a new dimension to expatriate writing in general. Postmodernism and globalisation have both contributed to a state of affair where migrancy is seen as a part of the human condition. Nostalgia and cultural memory play an important role in this.

QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by the term 'Diaspora'? How does the diasporic consciousness get reflected in writing in general?
2. 'Diasporic criticism has come to have its own distinct identity in recent times.' Comment.

UNIT 18 ONDAATJE: LIFE AND WORKS

Structure

- 18.0 Objectives
- 18.1 Ondaatje: Life
- 18.2 Ondaatje: Works
- 18.3 Larger Implications of Ondaatje's Life and Works Questions

18.0 OBJECTIVES

This short unit will try to give students a sketchy idea of Michael Ondaatje's life and works in order to help them place the novel being studied here – *The English Patient* – in better perspective.

18.1 ONDAATJE: LIFE

Michael Ondaatje was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka on 12 September, 1943. In 1954 he moved to London. He had his schooling there. In 1962 he moved to Canada to live with his brother Christopher. He enrolled in Bishop's University, Quebec. He married in 1964 and moved to Toronto. He finished the last year of his undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto. He became a Canadian citizen in 1966 but before that (in 1965) he moved to Kingston, Ontario. There he began his M.A. in English at the University of Toronto. In 1967 he completed his Master's thesis and published his first collection of poems *Dainty Monsters*. He also started teaching English at the University of Western Ontario in London (a part of the Canadian province of Ontario).

In 1971 Ondaatje accepted a teaching position in the Glendon College Campus of Toronto's York University after choosing not to do the Ph.D. thesis required to maintain his position at the University of Western Ontario job. During the summer of 1979 he taught at the University of Hawaii. The next year (1980) he separated from his wife and began to live with the writer Linda Spalding. The literary journal *Brick* is their joint venture.

The English Patient has brought Ondaatje great fame both as a novel and as a film. He has won numerous other awards for his poetry and fiction.

18.2 ONDAATJE: WORKS

Ondaatje's output as a creative writer has been quite formidable but his works often have a way of resisting generic classifications.

The Dainty Monsters (1967)

Rat Jelly (1973)

Elimination Dance (1977)

There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do (1979)

Secular Love (1984)

'The Man with Seven Toes' (1969)
The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (1979)
Running in the Family (1982)
In the Skin of a Lion (1987)
The English Patient (1992)
Anil's Ghost (2000)

The Dainty Monsters, *Rat Jelly*, *Elimination Dance*, *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do*, *Secular Love* are collections of poems. *'The Man with Seven Toes'* is a long narrative poem. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* mixes genres extensively. *Running in the Family* is a fictional memoir. *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* are novels.

His poetry is especially attentive to unusual details and unexpected combinations. *Secular Love* is a poignant and unbinding account of the breaking of his marriage and the growth of a new relationship.

Ondaatje's 1976 work *Coming Through Slaughter* is also a novel. Here he tells the story of Buddy Bolden, a celebrated early New Orleans jazz musician. Buddy Bolden eventually went mad.

The two long narrative works *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* share many of the concerns found in his poetry. Notable among these are sensitivity to language and interest in silence, chaos and order.

The families' section in *Rat Jelly* closes with the poem 'Letters and Other Worlds' which is a touching and sensitive account of the flamboyant life and solitary death of the poet's father.

The 1987 novel *In the Skin of a Lion* needs to be talked about a little as part of it overflows into *The English Patient* itself. This novel (*In the Skin of a Lion*) has a specifically Canadian setting; Toronto and Northern Ontario in the 1920s and 1930s. The central character is Patrick, a Canadian working man, whose experiences in the Depression years between the wars are quite interesting. Caravaggio is a thief whose life is saved by Patrick. There is a young nun who eventually becomes Hana's mother. There is also Clara, an actress. Clara is the mistress of the absconding tycoon Ambrose Small. She comes to be Hana's stepmother in the course of time. Hana's real father is Cato, the loggers' strike organizer who is murdered by the bosses. Both Caravaggio and Patrick figure in the following description which appears on page 241 of the 1988 paperback Picador edition of the novel:

This is 7 July 1938. A night of no moon, a heat-wave in the city. The lemon-coloured glare from the waterworks delineates the east end. Caravaggio could lean forward and pluck it like some jewel from the neck of a negress. He rows in a straight line towards the waterworks, knowing Patrick is underneath him in the five-foot-diameter pipe racing within the current, his movement under water like a clenching fist, doubling up and releasing to full length then doubling up, awkward because of the weight he carries.

Towards the end of the novel there is description featuring Patrick and Hana. It reads:

On the balcony in the night air, he peered down into the landlord's long green garden. The last of the previous day's heat was still in the atmosphere. Hana locked up and they went down the two flights of metal stairway and then walked along Albany Street towards the car. The houses at this hour beautiful and large, stray lights on within them, and he could see the faint interiors, their privacy and character

revealed, each room a subplot. His good arm was around Hana's shoulder while she hugged the thermos to her.

The setting for one of Ondaatje's recent novels is *Anil's Ghost* is Sri Lanka. As we know it is a country steeped in centuries of tradition. Now it faces internal strife. Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese people are the two parties in this civil war kind of situation. (LTTE is an organisation of militant Tamils).

Anil Tissera, the protagonist of the novel, is a young woman born in Sri Lanka and educated in England and America. She returns to Sri Lanka as a forensic anthropologist sent by an International Human Rights group to investigate the organised murder campaign going on in Sri Lanka. Her story is a story of family of love, and of identity. It is also a story about the quest to unravel the hidden past. On page 145 of the Picador paperback edition there is this description of Anil:

She emerged with no partner. Cloudless at last. She was unable to bear the free months before she could begin classes again, before she could draw her studies close to her, more intimately and seriously than she had imagined possible. When she did return she fell in love with working at night, and sometimes she couldn't bear to leave the lab, just rested her happily tired dark head on the table. There was no curfew or compromise with a lover anymore. She got home at midnight, was up at eight, every casebook and experiment and investigation alive in her head and reachable.

On the next page (p.157) we have this:

The country existed in a rocking, self-burying motion. The disappearance of schoolboys, the death of lawyers by torture, the abduction of bodies from the Hokandara mass grave. Murders in the Muthurajawela marsh.

To go back briefly to *Coming Through Slaughter*, it is a documentary recreation of Bolden's life. The recreation is achieved through a collage of fragmented memoirs, archival material, hospital files and interview. There is a fascinating evocation of the downtown world of bars, whores and of stratifies bursting with music.

Sometimes there are cinematic scenes. They have a jagged aspect about them.

One description is really arresting. (it appears on page 90 of the 1984 Picador paperback edition of the book).

He tried to take in the smell of her. The taste of her mouth in the next room they passed along the road..... Accidental lust on the bus carrying her now into his dead brain so even months later, years later, pieces of her body and character returned.

18.3 LARGER IMPLICATIONS OF ONDAATJE'S LIFE AND WORKS

Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan by birth and now a Canadian citizen is a kind of international citizen like Pico Iyer. He is a globalised soul who feels most at home in Toronto, which is a multi-cultural city in every sense of the word. Lately, a whole new group of writers have started giving us writing which goes beyond national boundaries. The cultural logic of late capitalism and the world's becoming a kind of global village have given peoples a new sense of identity, which is quite complex and fluid. Ondaatje also likes to make his writings quite hybridized. He moves beyond

limitations imposed by single genres. The poetic element in his writing is always quite strong. His life also have been unconventional and impulsive. So a new kind of writer figure is emerging and Ondaatje's life and works are quite representative in this regard.

Ondaatje : Life and Works

QUESTIONS

1. Enumerate a few interesting aspects of Ondaatje's life.
2. How do some of Ondaatje's works defy limitations imposed by single genres?
3. What is postmodern about Ondaatje's authorial stance?

UNIT 19 *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*: THEME, STRUCTURE AND CHARACTERIZATION

Structure

- 19.0 Objectives
- 19.1 *The English Patient*: Theme
- 19.2 *The English Patient*: Structure
- 19.3 *The English Patient*: Characterization
- 19.4 Conclusion
- Questions

19.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall first briefly discuss the thematic strands and structure of *The English Patient* and then go onto Ondaatje's handling of characters, especially with regard to the four people brought together in an Italian villa. This happens in the closing stages of World War-II.

19.1 *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*: THEME

The English Patient is a book in which love and war are interconnected and projected onto the background of the desert. The novel is about history, memory, war, love, identity, forgetting and hybridity. Betrayals in war and betrayals in peace both figure here. Desire is also a major theme. What desire does to personalities is part of it. The novel has a cast of four. They seem arbitrarily connected by contingencies. Their factured identities have a fluidity and a multiplicity about them which is postmodern.

The novel is also about travel, about maps, about adventure, about morality, loyalty and survival. The novel is also about identity as already stated.

What we have here is a plural notion of identity that belongs to different cultural spaces. The common characteristic of the four main characters is displacement from their native country. The textual identity of Almasy, who is a reservoir of information, is translated by the desert just as he himself translated the text of the desert. For Hana, the Italian Villa becomes a second home. She no longer recognizes Canada as her native land. She is sick of Europe where she lost her father and the father of her child. The child was also lost. She is half adult, half child.

Caravaggio is polytropic in that his identity is a mixture of the Italian, the traveler, the thief, the spy, the double agent, the lover and the friend. He also serves as someone to whom Hana confesses things. He is able to read the 'text' of others identities. He is better than others in the matter of seeing through facades

The desert (real or symbolic) is the specific space in which the identities of Almasy, Hana, Caravaggio, and Kip are fragmented, inscribed, described and interpreted.

Kip's identity is less multi-dimensional than the identities of the other three. Still he becomes a kind of 'touchstone'. All four are (or have been) 'efficient' each in his/her own way but Kip retains that efficiency to a greater degree. His admiration for Lord Suffolk and for Lord Suffolk's secretary Miss Morden is a part of his emotional fibre. Almasy and Caravaggio are often skeptical.

We are told this about Kip:

He seems casually content with this small group in the villa, some kind of loose star on the edge of their system. This is like a holiday for him after the war of mud and rivers and bridges. He enters the house only when invited in, just a tentative visitor, the way he had done that first night when he had followed the faltering sound of Hana's piano and come up the cypress-lined path and stepped into the library. (p.75)

On page 74 we are told:

He is still very much a youth. He wolfs down food, jumps up to clear away his plate, allowing himself half an hour for lunch.

A couple of pages earlier are told:

He is a relief to her in his self-sufficiency, to all of them in the house, though Caravaggio grumbles at the sapper's continuous humming of Western songs he has learned for himself in the last three years of the war. (p.73)

About Caravaggio Hana's written testimony (which she writes on a blank page of the back of her copy of *The Last of the Mohicans*) is interesting. She writes there:

There is a man named Caravaggio, a friend of my father's. I have always loved him. He is older than I am, about forty-five. I think. He is in a time of darkness, has no confidence. For some reason I am cared for by this friend of my father. (p.61)

One page 49 we are told about the earlier relationship of Hana and Caravaggio. (This relationship goes back to *In the Skin of a Lion*). In *The English Patient* we are told:

In her childhood her classroom had been Caravaggio. He had taught her the 'somersault'. (p.49)

Two pages prior to these lines we are told:

Caravaggio, who had been her father's gregarious friend in Canada, in those days was capable of standing still and causing havoc within the caravan of women he seemed to give himself over to. He now lay in his darkness. He had been a thief who refused to work with men, because he did not trust them, who talked with men but who preferred talking to women and when he began talking to women was soon caught in the nets of relationship. (p.47)

19.2 THE ENGLISH PATIENT: STRUCTURE

There are 10 sections in *The English Patient*. The first section is called 'The Villa'. This gives the setting of the Italian Villa. Hana and English Patient are both introduced here. The English Patient is Hana's disappearing Saint. What he tells her amounts to dragging her into that well of memory. He kept plunging during those months before he dies. He tells her 'I fell burning into the desert'. She asks him 'Who are you?' he replies 'I don't know. You keep asking me.' When she reads to him, he listen to her following her words like water. During this time books became half-Hana's word. When she opens the book, 'A Narrative of 1757' we are told:

She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments, as if awaking from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams. (p.12)

We are also told that she and the Englishman had insisted on remaining behind in the Villa when the other nurses and patients moved to a safer location in the south. The English Patient keeps delving into his memory and brings in a lot of desert life into his narrative.

The second section is called 'In Near Ruins' and introduces Caravaggio. We are told here about the earlier relationship between Hana and Caravaggio. This relationship goes back to the previous novel *In The Skin of a Lion*. Hana and Caravaggio talk about the English Patient. We also come to know that one of Caravaggio's skills is stealing. He was caught by the enemy and his hands were nearly chalked off. One of the passages in this section is read:

Caravaggio watches Hana, who sits across from him looking into his eyes, trying to read him, trying to figure the flow of thought the way his wife used to do. He watches her sniffing him out, searching for the trace. (p.39)

Another thing we are told is about their present:

But now there is hardly a world around them and they are forced back on themselves. During these days in the hill town near Florence, indoors during the days of rain, daydreaming in the one soft chair in the kitchen or on the bed or on the roof, he has no plots to set in motion, is interested only in Hana. And it seems she has chained herself to the dying man upstairs. (p.40)

Figurality enters the section through Hana's wish:

Someday there would be a bower of limes, rooms of green light.

Caravaggio and Hana are quite close to each other and he tells her that she needs to protect herself from sadness. We are also told later in this section. The English Patient talking about the Villa and does so quite know legibly. Another thing we are told about Hana and Caravaggio is:

He sat down with the carafe of wine the monks from the monastery had given Hana. It was Hana's house and he moved carefully, rearranging nothing. He notices her civilization in the small wildflowers, the small gifts to herself. Even in the overgrown garden he would come across a square foot of grass snipped down with her nurse's scissors. If he had been a younger man he would have fallen in love with this. (p.58)

At the end of this section, we find that when Caravaggio returns from somewhere he finds Hana and two soldiers from the sapper unit in the kitchen making up sandwiches.

The third section is called 'Sometime a Fire' and we are given a description of Kip (or Kirpal Singh). We are told how he gets used to life in the Villa. We are told:

The Sikh sets up a tent in the far reaches of the garden, where Hana thinks lavender was once grown. She has found dry leaves in that area which she has rolled in her fingers and identified. Now and then after a rain she recognizes the perfume of it. (p.72)

When he moves amongst the other, Hana sees him in a distance of defunct garden with the diviner or, if he has found something, unraveling that knot of wires and fuzes someone has left him like a terrible letter. We are told about Kip that he slips half in and half out of the camp. We are also told that he is always washing his hands. About Hana we are told:

Even among those she worked closely with she hardly talked during the war. She needed an uncle, a member of the family. She needed the father of the child, while she waited in this hill town to get drunk for the first time in years, while a burned man upstairs had fallen into his four hours of sleep and an old friend of her father's was now rifling through her medicine chest, breaking the glass tab, tightening a bootlace round his arm and injecting the morphine quickly into himself, in the time it took for him to turn around. (p.85)

About Kip we are told:

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 hers – which Caravaggio suspected he was taking from the Franciscan's 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 fuze wire. This was followed by fruit. Caravaggio suspected he had gone through the whole invasion never eating from a mess canteen. (p.86)

Some questions bother Hana. These are:

Did her father struggle into his death or die calm? Did he lie the way the English patient reposes grandly on his cot? Was he nursed by a stranger? (p.90)

About her father we are told that he loved a city of his own invention, whose streets and walls and borders he and his friend have painted. This obvious is a refer to Toronto which figures a prominently in a previous novel *In the Skin of a Lion*. One intimate seen from Section III is described in the following way:

A party began in the English patient's room when Caravaggio revealed the gramophone he had found somewhere.

"I will use it to teach you to dance, Hana. Not what your young friend there knows. I have seen and turned my back on certain dances. But this tune, 'How Long Has This Been Going On,' is one of the great songs because the introduction's melody is purer than the song it introduces. And only great jazzmen have acknowledged that. Now, we can have this party on the terrace, which would allow us to invite the dog, or we can invade the Englishman and have it in the bedroom upstairs. Your young friend who doesn't drink managed to find bottles of wine yesterday in San Domenico. We have not just music. Give me your arm. No. First we must chalk the floor and practise. Three main steps – one-two-three – now give me your arm. What happened to you today?" (p.107)

Another description goes like this:

Her cheek rested against the muscles of Caravaggio's shoulder. She could feel those terrible paws on her back against the clean frock, and they moved in the limited space between the bed and the wall, between bed and door, between the bed and the window alcove that Kip sat within. Every now and then as they turned she would see his face. His knees up and his arms resting on them. Or he would be looking out of the window into darkness. (p.109)

On page 127 we are told:

She learns all the varieties of his darkness. The colour of his forearm against the colour of his neck. The colour of his palms, his cheek, the skin under the turban. The darkness of fingers separating red and black wires, or against bread he picks off the gunmetal plate he still uses for food. Then he stands up. His self-sufficiency seems rude to them, though no doubt he feels it is excessive politeness.

She loves most the wet colours of his neck when he bathes. And his chest with its sweat which her fingers grip when he is over her, and the dark, tough arms in the darkness of his tent, or one time in her room when light from the valley's city, finally free of curfew, rose among them like twilight and lit the colour of his body.

A little later, we are told:

Later she will realize he never allowed himself to be beholden to her, or her to him. She will stare at the word in a novel, lift it off the book and carry it to a dictionary. *Beholden. To be under obligation.* And he, she knows, never allowed that. (p.128)

Fourth section is called 'South Cairo 1930-1938'. Here begins the story, which the English patient tells about his life in the desert. At the start of this section, we are told about the geographical society in London. The English patient talks extensively about the desert. About his expedition, he says:

We had to keep moving. If you pause sand builds up as it would around anything stationary, and locks you in. you are lost forever. (p.137)

An important observation, the English patient makes :

There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful human I've met in my life. 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. (p.138)

A little later he states:

But I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. By the time war arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation. (p.139)

One observation he makes is:

In the desert the most loved waters, like a lover's name, are carried blue in your hands, enter your throat. One swallows absence. A woman in Cairo curves the white length of her body up from the bed and leans out of the window into a rainstorm to allow her nakedness to receive it. (p.141)

This is a way of introducing Katharine into the story. A date is given to the beginning of her entrance into his life. It is the year 1936.

The next section (Section V) is called 'Katharine' focuses on the woman who became the English patient's love during those Cairo days. At the start of this section we are told:

THE FIRST TIME she dreamed of him she woke up beside her husband screaming. (p.149)

At one point the following realization come to English patient

Nothing can keep him from her. (p.153)

A page later we are told:

Sometimes when she is able to spend the night with him they are wakened by the three minarets of the city beginning their prayers before dawn. He walks with her through the indigo markets that lie between South Cairo and her home. The beautiful songs of faith enter the air like arrows, one minaret answering another, as if passing on a rumour of the two of them as they walk through the cold morning air, the smell of charcoal and hemp already making the air profound. Sinners in a holy city. (p.154)

A little before the close of the section, we are told:

From this point on in our lives, she had whispered to him earlier, we will either find or lose our souls. (p.158)

Section VI is called 'A Buried Plane'. Here also Cairo figures much. At the very start, there is this description:

The long Cairo evening. The sea of night sky, hawks in rows until they are released at dusk, arcing towards the last colour of the desert. A unison of performance like a handful of thrown seed. (p.161)

In this very section Caravaggio tries to tell Hana about the English patient's real identity. According to him, he is a Hungarian Almásy who works for the German's during the war. Caravaggio also asked some question of the English patient who tells him about an event from his past. Here the English patient tells us that he was amazed that Katharine had loved him in spite of his liking for anonymity. We also told:

In the cave, after all those months of separation and anger, they had come together and spoken once more as lovers, rolling away the boulder they had placed between themselves for some social law neither had believed in. (p.171)

We are told that Clifton, Katharine's husband did something suicidal by crashing his plane. Meanwhile the English patient and Kip also develop some intimacy. The English patient 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 homelands all our lives. Though Kip doesn't recognize that yet. That's why we get on so well together." (pp.176-177)

Here Kip also talks briefly about his own loss when he loses his mentor, who was blown up by a bomb.

In the next section (Section VII) is called 'In Situ'. This is mainly about Kip, his mentor, Lord Suffolk and his Secretary Morden. About Kip himself we are told:

He was the second son. The oldest son would go into the army, the next brother would be a doctor, a brother after that would become a businessman. (p.182)

In this section we are told a lot about bombs and about Lord Suffolk. On page 187, we are told:

Kirpal Singh had been befriended, and he would never forget it. So far, half of his time during the war had taken place in the slipstream of this lord who had never stepped out of England and planned never to step out of Countisbury once the war ended. 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. So that when he read the notice asking for volunteers with an experimental bomb squad, even though he heard other sappers speak of Lord Suffolk as a madman, he had already decided that in a war you have to take control, and there was a greater chance of choice and life alongside a personality or an individual.

The way recollects the accident, which killed Lord Suffolk is as follows:

He is with Hana in the night tent when he tells her about the explosion in Erith. A 250-kilogram bomb erupting as Lord Suffolk attempted to dismantle it. It also killed Mr. Fred Harts and Miss Morden and four sappers Lord Suffolk was training. May 1941. Singh had been with Suffolk's unit for a year. He was working in London that day with Lieutenant Blackler, clearing the Elephant and Castle area of a Satan bomb. They had worked together at defusing the 4,000-pound bomb and were exhausted. (p.190)

We are also told this:

He was accustomed to his invisibility. In England he was ignored in the various barracks, and he came to prefer that. The self-sufficiency and privacy Hana saw in him later were caused not just by his being a sapper in the Italian campaign. It was as much a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world. (p.196)

In the next section (Section VIII) is called 'The Holy Forest', the English patient resumes his narrative about Katharine. Caravaggio and Kip are also in the Villa at this time. About Hana we are told:

The patient turns to face her as she comes in. she touches his foot with the hand that holds the ladybird. It leaves her, moving onto the dark skin. Avoiding the sea of white sheet, it begins to make the long trek towards the distance of the rest of his body, a bright redness against what seems like volcanic flesh. (p.207)

Caravaggio tells Kip an incident when he tries to rob an Indian family in Toronto. In a book of poetry Hana writes about Kip:

He says Lahore is an ancient city. London is a recent town compared with Lahore. I say, Well, I come from an even newer country. He says

they have always known about gunpowder. As far back as the seventeenth century, court paintings recorded fireworks displays.

**The English Patient:
Theme, Structure and
Characterization**

He is small, not much taller than I am. An intimate smile up close that can charm anything when he displays it. A toughness to his nature he doesn't show. The Englishman says he's one of those warrior saints. But he has a peculiar sense of humour that is more rambunctious than his manner suggests. Remember "I'll rewire him in the morning." Ooh la la! (p.209)

About their life together at the Villa, we are told the following:

When there is a hot day at the Villa San Girolamo they all wash their hair, first with kerosene to remove the possibility of lice, and then with water. Lying back, his hair spread out, eyes closed against the sun, Kip seems suddenly vulnerable. There is a shyness within him when he assumes this fragile posture, looking more like a corpse from a myth than anything living or human. Hana sits beside him, her dark brown hair already dry. These are the times he will talk about his family and his brother in jail.

He will sit up and flip his hair forward, and begin to rub the length of it with a towel. She imagines all of Asia through the gestures of this one man. The way he lazily moves, his quiet civilization. He speaks of warrior saints and she now feels he is one, stern and visionary, pausing only in these rare times of sunlight to be godless, informal, his head back again on the table so the sun can dry his spread hair like grain in a fan-shaped straw basket. Although he is a man from Asia who has in these last years of war assumed English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son. (p.217)

Hana's disgust with feuds of the world is expressed as follows:

She turns away from him, her arms folded. The feuds of the world. The feuds of the world. She walks into the daylight darkness of the villa and goes in to sit with the Englishman. (p.218)

About Kip's way of seeing things and people we are told:

Everything is gathered by him as part of an altering harmony. He sees her in differing hours and locations that alter her voice or nature, even her beauty, the way the background power of the sea cradles or governs the fate of lifeboats. (p.219)

The new relationship between Caravaggio and Hana is described in the following words:

She had grown older. And he loved her more now than he loved her when he had understood her better, when she was the product of her parents. What she was now was what she herself had decided to become. He knew that if he had passed Hana on a street in Europe she would have had a familiar air but he wouldn't have recognized her. The night he had first come to the villa he had disguised his shock. Her ascetic face, which at first seemed cold, had a sharpness. He realized that during the last two months he had grown towards who she now was. He could hardly believe his pleasure at her translation. Years before, he had tried to imagine her as an adult but had invented someone with qualities moulded out of her community. Not this wonderful stranger he could love more deeply because she was made up of nothing he had provided. (pp.222-223)

About Kip and Hana, an interesting observation is on page 225:

He still has said nothing since he came into the room his head goes into that gesture she loves which is partly a nod, partly a shake of possible disagreement. He cannot see her for the glare. He turns off her light so they are equal in darkness.

Section IX is called 'The Cave of Swimmers', the English patient talks about Clifton and Katharine. He wonders if he was a curare upon the couple and for the desert rapped by war. He adds:

Everything I have loved or valued has been taken away from me.
(p.257)

In the last few lines of Section IX, the English patient says:

I carried Katharine Clifton into the desert, where there is the communal book of moonlight. We were among the rumour of wells. In the palace of winds. (p.261)

And the last section is called 'August'. Here what is mostly done by character is to think back on the past. The Kip and Hana think a lot of each other and have moments of great intimacy. On page 270 we are told:

In the tent Kip nestles against her neck. He dissolves to her scratching fingernails across his skin. Or he has his mouth against her mouth, his stomach against her wrist.

We are also told that Kip has mapped Hana's sadness more than any other. On page 271 we are told:

Hana is quiet. He knows the depth of darkness in her, her lack of a child and of faith. He is always coaxing her from the edge of her fields of sadness. A child lost. A father lost.

And then Kip gets away from it all i.e. a reaction to what western power did in the war. One single sentence sums up the horror:

One bomb. Then another. Hiroshima. Nagasaki. (.284)

Kip goes back to India and starts a new life there.

19.3 THE ENGLISH PATIENT: CHARACTERIZATION

In many ways the central character is Hana. A lot gets filtered though her consciousness. She is loving, caring, and outreaching but is capable of going into a shell from time to time. The shell-shocked state partly affects all the major characters.

Hana is now maturer, sadder and less young than she was in her Toronto days (a legacy from *In the Skin of a Lion*). Caravaggio the thief has a special place in her life (from her past). He is now a part of her present and flits like a shadow in-and-out of the spaces that she now inhabits.

Caravaggio has lost his fingers and is 'maimed' in that way. Kip has the indelible memory of the loss of his mentor. Almsy thinks of the past all the time. He virtually has no present except in the wait for death. He develops a kinship with Kip and once tells Hana about himself and Kip:

We are international bastards

Kip himself has virtually another incarnation and he is back in Punjab. We are told in the closing pages of the novel:

He is a doctor, has two children and a laughing wife. He is permanently busy in this city. At six p.m. he removes his white lab coat. Underneath he wears dark trousers and a short-sleeved shirt. He closes up the clinic, where all the paperwork has weights of various kinds – stones, inkpots, a toy truck his son no longer plays with – to keep it from being blown away by the fan. He climbs onto his bicycle and pedals the four miles home, through the bazaar. Whenever he can he swerves his bicycle over to the shadowed part of the street. He has reached an age when he suddenly realizes that the sum of India exhausts him. (p.299)

All the major characters are impulsive by and large and yet exercise some control when it is needed. They are (or have been) good in whatever they do (or did). They are functional (in some cases only partly so or not at all). A lot happens in the mind or in memory. A stream-of-consciousness keeps going on all the time. Images of light and darkness help to provide a kind of correlative to states of mind. Violence has had a role in their lives. It has maimed them physically or mentally. War still does not fully spare them. Kip's impulsive departure from the villa is largely an effect of war-related events.

The villa brings them all together and this kind of togetherness is part of the novel's thematic texture. Identities are fluid and they keep merging and reforming.

On page 117 we are told this about the four characters (collectively):

But here they were shedding skins. They could imitate nothing but what they were. There was no defence but to look for the truth in others.

Between Hana and Kip a special kind of intimacy develops. We are told on page 127:

She loves all the varieties of his darkness. The colour of his forearm against the colour of his neck. The colour of his palms, his cheek, the skin under the turban. The darkness of fingers separating red and black wires, or against bread he picks off the gunmetal plate he still uses for food. Then he stands up. His self-sufficiency seems rude to them, though no doubt he feels it is excessive politeness.

She loves most the wet colours of his neck when he bathes. And his chest with its sweat which her fingers grip when he is over her, and the dark, tough arms in the darkness of his tent, or one time in her room when light from the valley's city, finally free of curfew, rose among them like twilight and lit the colour of his body.

Ondaatje creates a paradoxical hero: he is a postmodern traveler who cannot move, a burnt pilot condemned to live the remaining days of his life in bed, at the end of the Second World War. We are told about Almasj:

He whispers again, dragging the heart of the young nurse beside him to wherever his mind is, into that well of memory he kept plunging into during those months before he died. (p.4)

The identities of the characters are integrated into the scenario. Affinities of nature are present not only between themselves, but also between themselves and the place. The Italian villa becomes a second home for Hana. She no longer recognizes Canada as her native land. She refuses to go back and to have any connection with her only relation left there, her stepmother. The girl is also sick of Europe, the place where she lost her father, her child, and the father of her child. It is also the place where her former identity was alchemically transformed. Thus deserted Europe and the deserted

house find their correlate in the desert where the former identity of the English patient was 'erased':

She herself preferred to be nomadic in the house with her pallet or hammock...Some nights she opened doors and slept in rooms that had walls missing...She was living like a vagrant. (p.13)

Kip also has a polytropic identity. His condition is characterized by physical displacement as he left his native country, India, and came to fight for the Allies in the Second World War (unlike his brother who preferred to be imprisoned rather than do the same). There is also a psychological displacement: he is the only character of the novel who does not look back.

The English patient identity is polytropic which means something which has many ways of being what is amounts to is that his being his always turning in various direction and multiplying the ways of his nature. He is a character of no character and a part from being a displaced paradoxical traveller he is also a greater deceiver. His identity is imprinted both in his psyche and his body. On page 48 of the novel we are told this with regard to Hana:

In the Pisa hospital she had seen the English patient for the first time. A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in fire...There was nothing to recognize in him.

The English patient travelled with the nomad rework the story of Herodotus from a postmodern perspective. He is part of symbolic process which works through his own memory. His knowledge is extensive and he is capable of translating the text of the desert. In turn, his own textual identity is translated by the desert. At one point in the narrative the English patient calls himself as an international bastard which means his national identity falls by the way side and a kind of global soul emerges. All this effects the other major character too.

What Ondaatje has created is a paradoxical hero is a modern traveler who cannot move, a burnt pilot condemned to live the remaining days of his life in bed, at the end of the Second World War. The story tells follows both a horizontal and vertical axis.

In *The English Patient*, the real or symbolical desert represents the place where the main characters meet each other and define their polytropic identities. It is the great text onto which the others' texts are translated. In this specific space, the identities of the English patient, Hana, David Caravaggio, and Kip are fragmented, inscribed, described, interpreted. The English patient – an epitome for all the others in the book – appears as an artifact, a collage made of fragments, of different ingredients. He is a kind of 'hybrid of identities', while the others are confused by this 'blurring of identity'. This gives rise to two basic questions: Is there any real image beyond these fake masks and voices? Can we still ask such a question in the case of a postmodern novel?

19.4 CONCLUSION

Thematically *The English Patient* is about loss, sadness, absence, memory, love, war, identity and hybridity. It is also about history, characterisation in the novel is one in which identities remain fluid.

QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the variety of thematic strands in *The English Patient*.
2. Who are the main characters in *The English Patient*. Give a brief account of their life together in the Italian Villa?

UNIT 20 *THE ENGLISH PATIENT* : TECHNIQUE

Structure

- 20.0 Objectives
- 20.1 Modernism and *The English Patient*
- 20.2 Postmodernist Elements in *The English Patient*
- 20.3 *The English Patient* as Film
- 20.4 Conclusion
- Questions

20.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit the focus will be on Ondaatje's handling of narrative technique in *The English Patient*. This will be done keeping in mind modernist as well as postmodernist elements. As was stated earlier, the novel's technique is mainly modernist whereas the thematic thrust is largely post-modernist.

20.1 MODERNISM AND *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

Presentation of materials in *The English Patient* happens largely along modernist lines but in the matter of subverting 'realistic' narrative structures, the modernist elements of technique are given a push towards postmodernist elements.

The novel has several converging plot-lines. All is held together in the consciousness of Hana. Towards the end the author makes a willing surrender of his power over the narrative.

A very important modernist feature is the way time is handled. The same applies to linearity. The social organization of time is submerged in personal awareness of time.

The novel's language is its real strength. Foregrounding language in that way is also a modernist feature. The language is extraordinarily sensuous and rhapsodic. It can be very factual too. Details of time, place and sequence are given meticulously quite often:

In the side pockets she found pieces of equipment to do with bomb disposal, which she didn't wish to touch. Wrapped up in another small piece of cloth was the metal spike she had given him, which was used for tapping maple sugar out of a tree in her country. (p.291)

The precision of factual and technical registers is combined with the complex allusiveness of mythical story deriving from Herodotus's *Histories*.

Precision is also there in the minutes of the geographical society, which met in London in the 1940s. Then it is there in the description of the parts of a bomb.

There are strong similarities between Joseph Conrad's 1900 novella *Heart of Darkness* and Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. For one thing, the narrative is a framed narrative. There is an indirect but unmistakable reliance on the broad stream-of-consciousness approach in the matter of time, memory and telling. In that sense, the Ondaatje text has in it a lot of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Most things and happenings are filtered through memory. History's layers keep getting unearthed progressively.

In an Interview with Eleanor Wachtel published in the Summer 1994 number of *Essays on Canadian Writing* (251) Ondaatje stated that he originally thought that *The English Patient* was going to be a contemporary book set entirely in that one period of the Second World War. He told the interviewer that once he got into the desert stuff, and through that, to Herodotus, he began picking up a sense of the layers of history. He then found himself going back deeper and deeper in time. He added that a special sense of history of the building overlaid with building was (perhaps unconsciously) central in the mind. He also added that all this had to do with unearthing history.

Time in this novel is an elastic element. It ranges back and forth through the years to Almasy's affair with the wife of another explorer, as well as bringing in Hana's experiences as a nurse. Kirpal Singh's feelings about England and Caravaggio's adventures as a thief and spy. The past of Hana and Caravaggio from the previous novel *In the Skin of a Lion* also figures briefly.

The backbone of the novel is its patterning of images, symbols and metaphors – the burning man falling from the sky is central with other images linked to it. Ondaatje uses images in an associative way which makes the narrative structure associative like a stream of consciousness. There is dependence on flashback, montages and memory. Figuralty comes into the way Hana reacts to Almasy's stories. On page 135 we are told:

Hana sits by his bed, and she travels like squire beside him during those journeys.

Figuralty is strongly there in the following description too:

To Hana the wild gardens were like further rooms. She worked along the edges of them aware always of unexploded mines. In one soil-rich area beside the house she began to garden with a furious passion that could come only to someone who had grown up in a city. In spite of the burned earth, in spite of the lack of water. Someday there would be a bower of limes, rooms of green light. (p.43)

Disruption of time is a key modernist feature of the technique in *The English Patient*. There are quick shift of perspective from the past to present in the broad stream-of-consciousness style so well practised earlier by James Joyce. Memory is handled as a fluidity. What it around to is a poetic conflation of past and present. Facts and insinuation are conflated. The overall effect is that stories legends, images are like asked from their rigid frames. Time in this novel is an elastic element. It ranges back and forth through the years to Almasy's affair with Katharine. Time takes in young Kip's feelings about England, his adopted country (for a while), Caravaggio's adventures as thief and spy and Hana's experience as a nurse. The novel even looks back to *In the Skin of a Lion*, the novel in which Hana and Caravaggio have already appeared. There the setting is Toronto, here it is a villa near Florence in Italy.

Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is a modernist work, adopting an approach to the writing of the novel which questions the realist conventions of the 19th century European novel, while dealing with the historical 'realities' of the Second World War. *The English Patient* is the narrative of four characters brought together, relentlessly, by the circumstances of the Second World War. They are Almasy, the 'English' patient, burnt so badly in a plane fire that his face is barely recognisable as a human face. The reader is given enough indications that Almasy has been working as a spy for the Germans. The young Hana who clings to the English patient, caring for him faithfully and tenaciously, lives with a deep, inner void, a sorrow brought on by the loss of her father, her lover and her unborn child (whom she has had aborted) in the same war. The third character, Caravaggio, a very dexterous thief (a friend of Hana's father, whom Hana has admired from childhood), now has hands without

thumbs; the thumbs were hacked off by the Germans and Caravaggio now combats his pain and humiliation by relying on large doses of morphine. The fourth prominent character is Kirpal Singh (nicknamed 'Kip' by the British), a Sikh. He has been trained as a mine-diffusion expert in England and serves in the British army. The four characters come together in a villa near Florence, recently used as a war-hospital by the Allies but formerly used by the Germans. The Germans have abandoned the villa but not before planting bombs not only in the villa, but in objects in the villa such as the piano, and all round the area surrounding it, making life for the inmates immensely perilous.

In the *The English Patient* language is intensively and self-consciously analysed so as to expose the element of choice and artifice in processes of manipulating meaning. There is also evidently, a relishing of such processes by the author.

Metaphors here have unusual mobility and their significances. The following extract is representative:

He glares out, each eye a path, down the long bed at the end of which is Hana. After she has bathed him she breaks the tip off an ampoule and turns to him with the morphine. An effigy. A bed. He rides the boat of morphine. It races in him, imploding time and geography the way maps compress the world onto a two dimensional sheet of paper (p.161)

The English Patient, is a narrative which proceeds largely along modernist lines in technique, while also mobbing postmodernist choices in dismantle 'realistic' narrative structures. Hana's individuality is released into greater and greater freedom by the randomness of signs which describe her and her actions, her thoughts and fantasies. We are told about Hana:

She is a woman of honour and smartness whose wild love leaves out luck, always taking risks, and there is something in her brow now that only she can recognize in a mirror.' (p.301)

The novel depends a lot on flashback montages and memory. These elements are predominately modernistic. At the same time the backbone of the novel it's patterning of images, symbols and metaphors. One of the key images is that of a man falling from the sky. A number of other images are organized around this image. The methods which Ondaatje follows most of the time are imagistic and that brings out the poet in him. On page 5 of the novel the English patient says to Hana 'I fell burning into the desert.' This was in response to her question how were you burned. The interesting thing is that the kind of damage which the atom bomb caused in Hiroshima and Nagasaki is closely tied up with massive fires.

20.2 POSTMODERNIST ELEMENTS IN *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

Two elements which are unmistakably postmodernistic about *The English Patient* are its overt intertextuality and the fluidity of identity in it. Desire plays a strong role in keeping identities fluid and 'lacks' of various kinds are at work all the time. Allowing the reader to take over as the writer of the text and allowing the text itself sufficient self-reflexivity are also postmodernism elements. Fluidity is also given to signs in general so that signification is never quite static. Metaphors and images are all kept quite mobile.

Intertextuality and the fluidity of subjectivity are both postmodernistic features. Intertextuality comes from the way 'texts' merge in Almasy's consciousness:

And in his commonplace book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus' *Histories*, are other fragments – maps, diary, entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books. (p.96)

Identity in *The English Patient* is 'polytropic' which means 'of many meanings'.

Plot itself is kept quite fluid. As Douglas Barbour (on p.209 of his book *Michael Ondaatje*) states:

Ondaatje's carefully casual bricolage of dissociated moments, the accumulation of narrative fragments never quite solidifies into a plot.

There is in fact a new integrative paradigm emerging which leads 'hybridized sites of imaginative transformation.' Time is given a new dimension through a poetic conflation of past and present. Facts and imagination are also conflated. As a result legends, myths or works of art are liberated from their rigid frames in a particular period that like seeds, they germinate and grow elsewhere. This is the kind of process which deconstructionists consider signification to be subject to.

In a sense, *The English Patient*, has in it elements of all the three main 'posts' of contemporary literary theory. First it has postmodernistic elements in it. Then it goes well with poststructuralist notions of identity (Laen) signification (Derida) and undecidability (Paul de Man). The element of 'desire' also is quite strong here. Most of the time desire is the obvious driving force behind the way characters act, react or simply have their 'being'. Finally there are elements of postcoloniality also. Canada, Italy and India meet and this closing pages shift the scene to Amritsar. Elements 'the postcolonial exotic' are there. Diasporic consciousness comes in as also does the question of migrancy being part of the human condition.

20.3 THE ENGLISH PATIENT AS FILM

Dennis Walder's *Post-colonial Literatures in English: History, Language, Theory* has a chapter in it. Its name is 'After Post-Colonialism?' (pp.189-209). One section of the chapter is named – 'The Cultural Mediation of the Post-Colonial Text' Walder states:

The film seems at first simply to gesture derivatively in the direction of such classic, exotic-romance films as *Casablanca*, *Ice Cold In Alex* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, while removing the complex, open-ended and decentering effect of the novel in order to promote itself in terms of nostalgic, popular fiction. (p.203)

We told that the concluding aerial shots of the Sahara desert which represents North Africa as seductively feminine, offering itself to the viewer in much the same term as those offered to the gaze of the overflowing proprietorial desiring capitalist Mehring in Nadien Gordimer's *The Conservationist*.

Walder quotes a review of the film by Sandra Hall, which appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 6th March, 1997 (p.15). The review was captioned 'Hot sand and shimmering sensuality' parts of it offer a summary which is useful for students. It reads:

Thanks to the surrounding hype, the story is now known to everybody who reads newspapers. It begins towards the end of World War II in a Tuscan villa where the 'English Patient' lies dying from disfiguring burns received in an air crash in the Sahara. A charming, lucid character, he has a mind packed with information of all sorts, yet claims not to remember his name or his nationality. Out of fondness for

him, a young French-Canadian army nurse, Hana (Juliette Binoche), has chosen to stay with him. She's also beginning to fall in love – with a Sikh sapper (Naveen Andrews) in the British Army, helping to rid the area of landmines.

Less kindly disposed to the burnt man is the fourth member of the group, David Caravaggio (Willem Dafoe). He's worked in Intelligence and knows that 'the English patient' is actually a Hungarian, Count Almasy – a former desert explorer suspected of an act of collaboration with the Nazis – but his affection for Hana makes him bide his time in trying to get to the truth.

Time is an elastic element in the novel, which ranges back and forth through the years to Almasy's affair with the Scott Thomas character, wife of another explorer, as well as taking in Hana's experience as a nurse; Caravaggio's adventures as a thief and spy; and the young Sikh's feeling about England, his adopted country.

Minghella chooses only what he really needs from these separate strands, concentrating his flashbacks on the Sahara of Almasy's prewar experience, which lives on as a golden world beyond the boundaries of nationality and the constrictions of ownership itself.

Patrick Deer in his article 'Defusing The English Patient' in Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo's (ed) book *Literature and Film* says that the film adaptation of *The English Patient* is at once a faithful transposition of elements of Michael Ondaatje's book, and a systematic betrayal of its dominant obsessions. He adds that the film not only defuses the anti-imperialist critical charge of the novel, it also bleeds Ondaatje's text of color and drains it of its historical specificity. We are also told that the novel's subversive treatment of the role of art in wartime and of gendered reading strategies is reduced, like the character of the Canadian nurse, Hana, to the handmaiden of patriarchal narrative. Patric Deer says a few pages later that:

In its celebration of a tragically romantic fusion of identities, its projection of a nebulous, portable Englishness, the depoliticized internationalism of its desert "expeditioners", and the amnesiac evasions of the patient, the film offers the vision of a seducing, transnational adventure in which bodily and national boundaries were an inconvenience and colonialism a matter of archaeology and eroticism. (p.211)

Soon after this we are told that:

In its celebrated flight sequences over the vast depopulated Sahara, it also erases the long history of connections between air power and empire. European imperialism becomes instead the brilliant, doomed precursor to the era of globalization. This is a long way from the critical, skeptical vision of Michael Ondaatje's novel. (p.211)

Deer also says:

The screen adaptation of *The English Patient* goes to great pains to try to produce a filmic "mirage" that reproduces some of the disorienting textual mosaic of the novel. Yet neither the film nor the book really produces the disorientation in the reader or audience of the kind she or the book's other critics suggest. This simulation of disorientation is one of the most seductive achievements of the film. In this respect, it mimics the novel's evocation of the shattering epistemological effects

of wartime trauma within the ruins of a stable narrative frame, which is one of the text's chiefest pleasure. (p.214)

A little later he adds:

This epistemological confidence at the heart of Ondaatje's novel, despite the projected mirage of experimentalism or disorientation, no doubt accounts for its great popularity and readability, despite its supposed "difficulty". This is signaled most tellingly in fractured images, as if somebody had already seen a film and was in a hurry to remember all the best bits. The text has now become the dangerous supplement of the film: needing not only to be translated, but also defused. In another temporal loop, Minghella's film version turns out to be not only temporally, but ontologically, prior to the novel. Thus the screen adaptation can claim to be the truer "original", more "classic" than the novel. (p.214)

A little later he adds:

The adaptation of *The English Patient* turns the novel's logic on its head: instead of an overthrow of the illusions and confusions of the old by a more skeptical younger generation, the film stages the sentimental aesthetic education of youth by middle age. (p.216)

Deer thinks that:

The novel's success depends on both resistance to and accommodation with the neoimperial mythology of the post-Cold War era. Novel and film belong to two different moments in the millennial memory boom.

20.4 CONCLUSION

Technique in *The English Patient* is dominated (to a considerable extent) by modernist elements. The thematic strands in it are largely postmodernist. The novel dexterously handles time, memory, identity, desire, forgetting and fluidity. It has sufficient intertextuality and self-reflexivity in it. Perspectives keep shifting and remembering keeps linking things.

About Ondaatje's overall achievement in *English patient*, Frank Birbalsingh in his 1995 book '*Novels and the Nation*' says:

Ondaatje carried out exhaustive research into archival material from the Royal Geographical Society, and books of travel and history in preparation for his novel. The result in *The English Patient* is a finely detailed, authoritative description of the North African desert, including its history, lore and veritable place in human consciousness.

All of this is sensitively evoked in the rich images, elegant diction and balanced sentence rhythms of a born poet. Ondaatje's desert lore in *The English Patient* reads like Melville's long discourses on whales in *Moby Dick*, or Marian Engel's treatise on bears in *Bear*: and like it, provides an explanation or justification for the existence of a particular natural species or phenomenon. His portrait of Italy and the war is also etched in detail of similar historical scope and depth, and supported by reference to authors from Herodotus Tacitus and Pliny to Kipling. (p.169).

A page later Birbalsingh says:

***The English Patient:*
Technique**

The activities of Ondaatje's characters, on the whole, are not presented in linear, chronological fashion. As in his previous books, they are interlaced with frequent flashbacks, and interwoven into an apparently freewheeling narrative that becomes all the more gripping because apparent complications, mysteries and crisscrosses do finally come together in a coherent whole. The structure of the novel, in other words, is nothing less than brilliant in being able to conjure order and coherence out of such apparent disorder and complexity. (170)

A page later (p.171) Birbalsingh adds:

The charred, corpselike body of the English patient is a potent symbol of terminal European disintegration and decline. In his distress, Kip finds solace in remembering anti-European remarks made by his brother who sided with "whoever was against the English" (p.291).

This is the postcolonial aspect of the novel, which brings Ondaatje's authorship into play as someone of non-white, third world origin now living in Canada. Kip's affair with Hana, for instance – a non-white man of third world origin, and a white Canadian woman – has a stronger impact, because of its colonial and colour implications, than the portrayal of another passionate affair – between the English patient and the wife of his wartime colleague.

His conclusion is:

This shared sense of homelessness and placelessness is a symptom of the general disease of human fragility and vulnerability which the novel has diagnosed. In Ondaatje's view, even if homelessness and placelessness have not been entirely produced by colonialism, they have been intensified by the joint effect of European enterprise and a dominant, European, scientific culture that has clearly overreached itself. (pp.171-172)

A critical excerpt which Walder quote is also quite helpful. It comes from Jeanne Delbaere in the book *The Contact and The Culmination: Essays in Honour of Hena Maes-Jelinek* edited by Marc Delrez and Benedicte Ledent. Delbaere's piece is entitled ' "Only re-connect": temporary pacts in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*'. On page 45 of the Book Delbaere states that in the book a new integrative paradigm emerges. It overtakes early post-colonialism with its sharp polarisation by creating hybridized sites of imaginative transformation. A few pages later we find Delbaere stating that what we have in the novel is:

A poetic conflation of past and present, of facts and imagination, liberating stories, legends, images, myths or works of art from their rigid frames in a particular historical period so that, like seeds, they germinate and grow elsewhere in a ceaseless organic recreation of the mind counteracting the inorganic 'progress' of technology.

QUESTIONS

1. In what ways is *The English Patient* a modernist novel?
2. Does the novel also have some postmodernist elements? Elaborate.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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